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Transitions from VET to HE: A successful pathway?
(Learning and Teaching, Symposium E)

***Learning Experiences of Students
with a VET-background in HE***

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Outline

- Research design: background and quantitative and qualitative methods
- Results: connection between educational pathway of students and their experience of learning in HE
- Discussion



Part 2 (Qualitative research methods)

1. What are the reasons for the success or otherwise of HE students with a vocational background? To what extent can these reasons be linked to the teaching practices, curricula and learning environments students experience?
2. To what extent are students with vocational qualifications prepared for studies in HE? What mechanisms are in place to remedy any lack of preparation?
3. How far are HE lecturers aware of, and able to respond to, the particular experiences and needs of students with vocational backgrounds?



Research methods in Part 2

- Transition into HE Questionnaire
- Expectations of HE Questionnaire
- Interviews with students
- Interviews with lecturers
- Interviews with admissions staff



Student Questionnaires

- the different educational and social backgrounds of students
- the expectations with which students start their studies
- the different perceptions of their new learning environment
- the perceived degree to which students feel prepared for their course by their previous educational pathway
- the challenges encountered in the first year of studies
- the students' perceptions of the teaching modes and of learning support experienced



Student Interviews

- the educational and social backgrounds of students
- the motives of students in applying to study in HE
- the criteria for selecting a specific subject and a specific institution
- the coherence/discrepancy between their previous and current learning experiences
- the personal contexts in which they study
- the criteria which underlie the perceptions of their new learning environments



Transition into HE Questionnaire

n=1105 (377 nursing, 359 business & 369 computing students) 64% return rate

HEI	n	nursing	business	computing
1	354	155	108	91
2	205	59	73	73
3	288	0	132	156
4	61	34	15	12
5	19	129	31	37



Qualification pathways of UK applicants to HE (2004/05) and students in our sample (Sources: UCAS dataset 2004/05 and own calculations).

Qualification pathway	% in sample	% in UK
Only A-levels or Scottish Highers	41.6	54.5
Only vocational qualifications	11.9	10.8
Only Foundation-/ Access course	4.4	4.3
Only 'other qualification'	4.1	6.5
A-levels/Scottish Highers & vocational	12.1	6.0
A-levels/Scottish Highers & other non-voc.	11.0	7.7
Any other combination	9.0	3.9
no qualification given	5.8	6.3



Distribution of qualification pathways within institutions in our sample

Qualification pathway	pre-92	post-92	FE College
Only A-levels or Scottish Highers	46.8	38.4	6.6
Only vocational qualifications	11.7	9.6	26.2
Only Foundation-/ Access course	10.2	7.9	0
Only 'other qualification'	4.9	5.6	8.2
A-levels/Scottish Highers & vocational	5.9	12.1	6.6
A-levels/Scottish Highers & other non-voc.	2.9	1.7	1.6
Any other combination	15.6	17.5	19.7
no qualification given	2.0	7.1	31.1

Distribution of qualification pathways within subject areas in our sample

Qualification pathway	Business	Computing	Nursing
Only A-levels or Scottish Highers	61.0	35.0	29.7
Only vocational qualifications	2.2	14.6	18.6
Only Foundation-/ Access course	5.3	2.4	5.6
Only 'other qualification'	5.6	2.7	4.0
A-levels/Scottish Highers & vocational	10.0	16.5	9..8
A-levels/Scottish Highers & other non-voc.	0.6	2.4	1.1
Any other combination	13.4	21.7	20.7
no qualification given	1.9	4.6	10.6

Decision-making processes: Institutional choice

- Questionnaire data (Q. 17):
Please tell us why you chose to study at this university.
- Most important reasons for choosing an institution:
Location (~ 60%)
Perceived quality (~ 45%)
Various combinations (→ valid across institutions and pathways)
- Subtle institutional differences:
Location more important for students at FE College (80%)
Continuation of studies at the same institution (only for FE College students)
Perceived quality less of a factor for FE College students
Manageable level of academic requirements a sizable factor for students at post-92 University



Decision-making processes: Subject choice/motivation

- **Questionnaire data** (Q. 20 – answers in 5pt scale, ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'disagree', see Hounsell et al., 2005)
 - a. I want to develop knowledge and skills I can use in a career*
 - b. I hope the things I learn will help me to develop as a person and broaden my horizons*
 - c. I'm focused on the opportunities here for an active social life and/or sport*
 - d. I hope the whole experience here will make me more independent and self-confident*
 - e. I'm mainly here because it seemed the natural thing: I'd done well academically in the past*
 - f. I want to learn things which might let me help people, and/or make a difference in the world*
 - g. I want to study the subject in depth by taking interesting and stimulating courses*
 - h. I mainly need the qualification to enable me to get a good job when I finish*
 - i. I want an opportunity to prove to myself or to other people what I can do*



Decision-making processes: Subject choice/motivation

- Questionnaire data (Q. 20):
- Factor analysis produces 2 important factors, one associated with 'intrinsic' and one associated with 'extrinsic' motivations for choosing a specific subject
- Factor 1: Extrinsic motivation
High for students across our sample
Mean scores between 1.31 (business) and 1.16 (nursing)
No substantial differences according to educational pathways
But: high standard deviations → highly individualised processes
- Factor 2: Intrinsic motivation
Significant differences: subject choice of computing and business students less strongly intrinsically motivated than of nursing students
Mean scores: 1.41 (nursing), 2.61 (computing), 2.63 (business) for item *I want to learn things which might let me help people, and/or make a difference in the world*



Decision-making processes:

Some interpretations and implications

- Complex individualised decision-making patterns in which institution and subject choices are only two elements
 - Rational choice models only provide limited scope for explaining individual decisions
 - Strong impact of restrictive information strategies
 - High degree of 'self-limitation' affects students' perception of opportunities available. Importance of boundaries of
 - physical space (location of HEI)
 - academic space (as defined by requirements set)
 - social space (perceptions behaviour of peer groups)
- Impact of educational pathway on degree of 'self-limitation'?



Post-92 computing student

OK well, I'm from X, I'm local and I left school, started A-levels at college but quit after a couple of months 'cos I was quite keen to start work but always planned to come to uni (...) So, I was working for 3 or 4 years , full-time. (...) was just doing some studying through my work (...) but I always knew I was somehow going to come to uni. Didn't know whether that would be through A-levels or an Access course, but when I came home I couldn't find a sort of an appropriate [Access computing course] luckily (...)



Post-92 computing student cont'd

I kind of put that idea on hold and then about April last year during a conversation with a friend I kind of randomly decided that I was going to try to go to uni and obviously because I haven't got A-levels, but because I'm now 23, I knew there were other routes, so I rang the admissions tutor for the course and explained that I haven't got A-levels but obviously I did have some experience (...) He basically (...) challenged me to convince him to let me in.



Post-92 computing student cont'd

So I applied through UCAS and as well as doing that I also submitted a folder full of references, my CV and an extra personal statement straight through the admissions tutor and then he decided to let me in (...) I didn't think the UCAS page was enough (...) I went through each of my experiences and said why it was relevant to this course and how I'd been able to use computing and how I'd learnt and how I'd taught myself you know how to use computers and how I used them in my work and in my life.



Post-92 computing student cont'd

I: And the references from employers?

S: Yeah and a personal message from my friend, who's now doing a Masters Degree here, sort of a character reference saying that I could more than cope.

I: And are you coping?

S: Yeah, easily.



References

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