

Degrees of Success:

Learners' transition from Vocational Education and Training to Higher Education

Many Vocational Education and Training (VET) pathways in 14-19 education aim to provide learners with the opportunity to progress to Higher Education. Policy-makers and educationists assume that these routes increase educational opportunities for young people and widen access to HE. The project *Degrees of Success: the transition between VET and HE* assesses this assumption and investigates the challenges learners face when they apply to, and enter, HE from a VET background.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The primary target groups for widening participation are over-represented in HE applicants with a VET background | ➔ | Increasing the share of those from a VET background within the student body would contribute to wider access to HE. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Combinations of vocational and academic qualifications significantly increase the probability of access to HE compared to VET qualifications alone. | ➔ | Processes which support combining academic and vocational qualifications need to be strengthened and developed. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• VET students are overrepresented in less selective institutions. | ➔ | Parity of esteem between vocational and academic qualifications remains a myth. This has potentially serious implications for the introduction of Diplomas. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Many HE lecturers have limited awareness of the diverse qualification backgrounds of their students and their possible impact. | ➔ | More appropriate approaches to teaching and learning in HE require better understanding of students' VET backgrounds |

The research

The *Degrees of Success* project investigated ways in which people with Vocational Qualifications (VQs) make the transition to higher education. The project had three interlinked parts, summarised in the diagram below. At the heart of the research design were a set of User Forums consisting of practitioners from both the HE and the VET communities. By interacting with the products of the research, they provided the feedback mechanisms shown in the diagram.

Part 1 analysed large-scale datasets from 1995-2005 in order to map the transitional terrain between VET provision and HE, and to understand the factors that have an impact on the probability of transition to, and success in, HE.

In order to follow up issues that cannot be resolved by secondary data analysis alone, *Part 2* compared and contrasted the background of students with vocationally and more academically-oriented entry qualifications, and their respective experiences of the learning environments provided by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

Part 3 of the project initiated a discourse with the VET and HE communities, in order to discuss the findings of the first two parts of the study, and to make them relevant in practice.

Transitional landscapes

The government is putting much emphasis on improving the transition into HE for students from a VET background. While a number of widening participation projects are investigating this group, our knowledge about their transition rates for people with vocational qualifications, and their specific problems when at university, remains inadequate. One reason is that most official statistics merge the different pathways taken by students (GCE A-level with GNVQ and VCE A-level for example) and look only at the level of their qualifications rather than their type.

Our project combined different administrative large-scale datasets (primarily from UCAS, HESA and ILR) to follow students from their level 3 qualifications into HE, and also to look at their success within HE. A first major

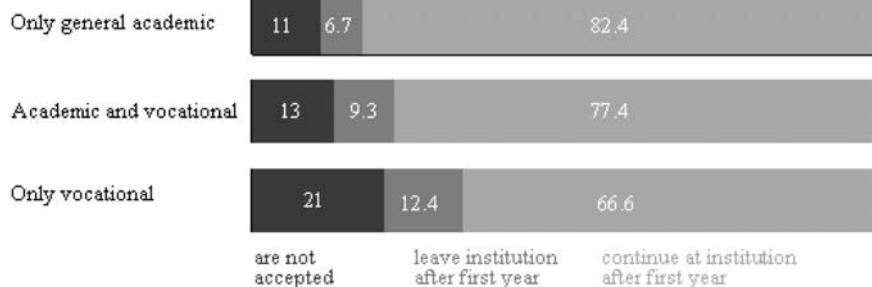


Figure 2: Transition into HE from different educational pathways

result for the research community (achieved in cooperation with other TLRP Widening Participation projects) was the development of a finer-grained analysis of these administrative data, which disentangles the different pathways. This allowed us, in a second step, to draw a detailed picture of the transition landscape.

We know that including students from VET backgrounds would widen participation instead of simply increasing it. Those applying from a VET background and other non-traditional routes are, on average, from more disadvantaged backgrounds. In addition it is worth noting the high proportion of men in the VET pathway. 52 per cent are male, a higher proportion than in any other pathway including the general academic route, access and foundation courses, and other qualifications. Including these students would be a further means to widen participation and simultaneously return to a more equal gender distribution within the HE sector.

The proportion of students entering HE with vocational qualifications increased between 1995 and 2004 from 18 per cent to 25 per cent. However, this growth is due to an increase of those combining vocational and academic qualifications, up from 4 per cent to 14 per cent. Over the same period, the proportion of students entering HE with vocational qualifications only decreased from 14 per cent to 10 per cent.

Compared to traditional A-level students, those with VET qualifications have a much higher risk of not obtaining a place in HE, and of dropping out after their first year. But the picture is much more favourable for those combining the two pathways,

who are nearly as successful at entering and completing HE than those with only general academic qualifications.

The distribution of VET students across different institutions reveals a pessimistic picture. They are heavily under-represented in higher 'status' HEIs, i respective of whether the hierarchy of HEIs is represented in terms of RAE results, historical groupings (Pre- and Post-92 institutions), QAA scores, or tariff-point intake criteria. While students from a VET background contribute to a widening in access, it remains a question whether this constitutes fair access for them. This is a result of processes at the level of the students (perceptions, self-limitations) and at the level of the institutions (tracking, problems with admission for non-traditional qualifications).

A further result is the under-representation of students with VET backgrounds in many "classical" subjects such as philosophy or languages, and their overrepresentation in some more applied subjects like engineering and technology, computer science and creative arts and design. The major exceptions are the professional fields of medicine and law. The students with VET backgrounds seem primarily to be found in the fields where there are perceived skills shortages. If this is the case, such students could contribute not only to a widening participation agenda, motivated primarily by a concern with social justice, but also to the connected policy aim of producing a more competitive workforce, motivated by economic concerns.

Learning experiences

First year students who had undertaken Vocational Education and Training before they started their HE studies describe their transition into HE as a complex and often difficult process. Their decision-making in terms of institutional and subject choice is highly individual and can often not be explained by conventional rational choice models. Difficulties perceived by students include:

- lack of preparation within the VET context for what is expected of them in HE;
- demands posed by specific study areas (for instance, mathematics) and assessment tools (for instance, essays and portfolios);
- finding a balance between their

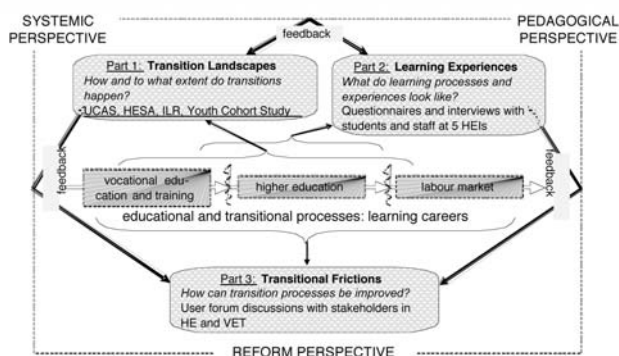


Figure 1: Perspectives and research areas of the project

studies, family commitments and the jobs they need to pursue to finance their studies.

This last point is in line with the findings from the first part of our project on the socio-economic status of students with a VET background. These three difficulties were reported with a high degree of consistency across the student population we investigated, which included students enrolled in three subject areas, business, computing, and nursing at five HEIs in England and Scotland.

The descriptive analysis of our questionnaire data illustrates how diverse the student body has become in a highly diversified HE system. Our data shows significant differences in the age and gender composition of the student body across the three subjects and across types of institutions (Pre- and Post-92 Universities and FE Colleges). Substantial differences also exist in terms of the life context of students and the way they spend their time outside their studies. The combination of these dimensions results in stark contrasts. Compared with students coming into HE from the academic pathway, those with a vocational background are under-represented at the Pre-92 University, are older, have more responsibilities outside their studies, and are less likely to engage in extra-curricular activities.

Our interviews with 40 students at the five HEIs indicate that students with a VET background are often highly strategic in their decisions about progression into HE, their choice of institutions and programmes, and the utilisation of their HE studies in their future career. More than other groups of students, learners who come to HE with a VET background seem to be motivated by a combination of intrinsic interest in their subject and the opportunity to improve their career prospects by gaining a degree.

There may be self-limitation at work which leads students to exclude institutions beyond their perceived boundaries of physical, academic or social space from their choice processes. This exclusion seems to take place early on in students' decision-making. Boundaries of physical space were indicated by these students' emphasis on proximity to home. Academic restrictions were exercised by the grade requirements set by institutions, which affected choice patterns.

Our research showed that admissions staff, who are not necessarily lecturers, had a fairly clear picture of the kind of qualifications with which students apply. In most institutions there seem to be formalised mechanisms for judging the quality of applicants with vocational backgrounds or qualifications. However, these mechanisms are often not very transparent, and applicants with a vocational background are in many cases individually interviewed by a member of staff.

Despite their interest in the subject, HE

Major implications

Looking at widening participation issues in detail requires appropriate data which should, in principle, be available from the large-scale administrative datasets collected by UCAS and HESA. However, at the moment, the collection, presentation and access policy for these major administrative datasets may follow political goals (for example, "parity of esteem of vocational and academic level 3 qualifications") rather than an open research agenda. This is not very helpful. Instead, better cooperation between the agencies collecting data and the research community is required. Better access to full anonymised datasets and the inclusion of some categories and variables that are particularly relevant to research should be introduced. In particular, more easily accessible data on part-time and direct entry students and their educational background is needed. By combining different datasets our project is contributing to progress in this direction. Only on this basis is research-informed policy possible.

The implications of our analysis are that attempts to create stronger links between HE and VET programmes, and to change perceptions of potential applicants through outreach, have not yet resulted in evenly-distributed access to HE. In addition to policy instruments that intervene early in an individual's pathway to raise attainment at 16, additional mechanisms are need to achieve necessary changes in institutional and individual behaviour.

The finding that combining vocational and academic qualifications significantly increases a learner's transition probability to Higher Education is of potential importance given current qualification reforms. It could be that those students who currently combine such qualifications are more likely to be intending to go to Higher Education. Alternatively, the combination may facilitate their entry into HE. If the latter is the case then the Diploma provides a much stronger mechanism for effecting such a combination than previous reforms. For example, with the Additional Specialist Learning (ASL) slot is

lecturers often have limited knowledge of vocational qualifications in their field. While they are aware of specific programmes offered by local FE Colleges and other providers, and in some cases there is co-operation with local VET providers, some lecturers indicate that they lack the time to get to grips with some work-based qualifications such as NVQs.

Transitional frictions

The project has established User Forums which include members of individual HEIs and training institutions, of HE and VET agencies and of other national organisations, as well as fellow researchers. In these User Forums, preliminary findings have been discussed, additional research questions have been generated and underlying assumptions

exactly the right size to accommodate an A-level. However, learners embarking on Diplomas need to be made aware that their chances of entering HE depend, to some extent at least, on what they choose to study as their ASL. This points to a gap in information and guidance.

Conversely, current reforms to apprenticeship frameworks, whereby they become more aligned to immediate job needs and encourage less emphasis on the acquisition of technical certificates, may have an adverse effect on progression into Higher Education via this route. Such considerations need to be factored into the process of deciding on an apprenticeship

Our findings also suggest that students' educational backgrounds should be considered more carefully in the design of teaching and learning in HE. This might involve developing mechanisms for the transfer of application data from admissions units to HE lecturers, support for lecturers in finding out about the aims, content and structures of vocational qualifications, and increased collaboration between VET and HE institutions. The main task, however, is to strengthen lecturers' ability to respond to the diverse educational background of students in a meaningful way. This can contribute to a pedagogically-driven conceptualisation of teaching and learning in HE.

Our research shows that there are a variety of difficulties which students with a VET background have to overcome in their transition to HE; both before and after entry to an HEI. Students need to be able to draw on support to overcome these difficulties. However, existing support mechanisms are often not appropriate to deal with the complexity of issues faced by students with a VET background. Some current support mechanisms are only aimed at students with general academic qualifications. Others are too standardised for the particular needs of non-traditional students.

have been tested. By steering our research and disseminating our results, transitional frictions for students entering HE with a vocational background have been identified with the help of forum participants.

These User Forums initiated an exchange of ideas and increased collaboration between HE and VET actors. There were discussions of the impacts of the weakening demarcation lines between HE and VET. This change could lead to increased competition between institutions in the two sectors. But it also creates more scope for collaboration between them. Another consequence of the changing roles in the two sectors is a changing understanding of what constitutes 'vocational' as opposed to 'higher' education. Growing overlaps might be used to reduce transitional frictions for individual learners.

Further information

The best source for further information on the Degrees of Success project is its website:

<http://www.tlrp.org/project%20sites/degrees>. The website gives access to a number of working papers, newsletters, information on upcoming events and other materials. The site can be accessed via the TLRP website <http://www.tlrp.org>.

Published papers include:

Hoelscher, M., Hayward, G., Ertl, H. & Dunbar-Goddet, H. (2008) The Transition from Vocational Education and Training to Higher Education: A successful pathway? *Research Papers in Education*, 23, 2.

Ertl, H. & Dunbar-Goddet, H. (2008) Investigating the learning experience of HE students with a vocational pathway: Findings from a questionnaire survey. (Working Paper)

Dunbar-Goddet, H. & Ertl, H. (2008) Investigating the Transition to Higher Education: Descriptive analysis of a questionnaire survey. (Working Paper)

Hayward, G. & Hoelscher, M. (2007): Students with VET background applying for HE. Findings on the basis of current UCAS data. (Working Paper)

Dunbar-Goddet, H. & Ertl, H. (2007) Degrees of Success: Research on the Transition from Vocational Education and Training to Higher Education. (Working Paper)

The warrant

Our findings evolved from a rigorous, multi-method and multi-perspective research process. This process included detailed analysis of national datasets, such as the UCAS entry dataset and various HESA datasets. These datasets comprise information on millions of learners in HE. They allow us to combine information regarding the entry to, and progression within HE with information on learners' educational and social backgrounds. We analyse data from the last 10 years, so that we can track changes over a substantial period of time.

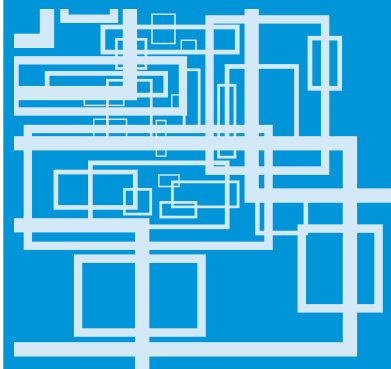
We also selected five HEIs for more detailed investigations. In these institutions, the entire intake of students in the three subject areas for the 2006-07 academic year was followed through its first year of studies, providing a further longitudinal element in the overall design.

The investigation of students' learning experiences included the following measures:

- Two student questionnaires, resulting in over 1700 analysed questionnaires
- Interviews with 40 students
- Interviews with 29 lecturers
- Interviews with 12 admissions staff

Findings from these research approaches were triangulated against each other and refined in discussions with practitioners, HE and VET stakeholders, experts in the field and fellow researchers via the User Forums, and relevant conferences and events within the framework of the TLRP programme.

Teaching and Learning Research Programme



TLRP involves over 60 research teams with contributions from England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Work began in 2000 and will continue to 2011.

Learning: TLRP's overarching aim is to improve outcomes for learners of all ages in teaching and learning contexts across the UK.

Outcomes: TLRP studies a broad range of learning outcomes, including the acquisition of skill, understanding, knowledge and qualifications and the development of attitudes, values and identities relevant to a learning society.

Lifecourse: TLRP supports projects and related activities at many ages and stages in education, training and lifelong learning.

Enrichment: TLRP commits to user engagement at all stages of research. It promotes research across disciplines, methodologies and sectors, and supports national and international co-operation.

Expertise: TLRP works to enhance capacity for all forms of research on teaching and learning, and for research informed policy and practice.

Improvement: TLRP develops the knowledge base on teaching and learning and policy and practice in the UK.

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