



Applications from Regional Further Education Colleges to Bristol and Bath Universities: Possible Factors Influencing Progression Rates

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Introduction

Between January and April 2008, widening participation staff at the universities of Bristol and Bath undertook a joint project looking at issues which may be affecting the progression rates of students from regional further education colleges onto undergraduate courses¹. The impetus came from application data which appeared to show that applications from FE colleges were less likely to result in an offer than those from other school types, and from concern expressed by a manager in a local college about the lack of progression by students to Bath and Bristol universities.

Between the two universities, 25 UCAS forms of rejected FE applicants were selected randomly and each one was discussed with admissions tutors to establish how their decision had been reached. Meetings were held with admissions tutors in Psychology, Social Policy, Accounting and Finance, English Literature, Early Childhood Studies, Engineering, Business Administration, Pharmacy and Sport and Exercise Science. In addition, we visited six regional further education colleges and talked to guidance managers about their experience of supporting students making applications from the full range of level 3 courses including A levels, access courses, BTEC national diplomas and other vocational qualifications such as the CACHE Diploma. Data collected on applications, offers and intake from each college to Bath and Bristol formed the starting point of some really useful discussions.

Judging by the positive response of FE and HE staff to the opportunity to discuss their current practice and the issues faced, it seems that the process of carrying out the research was as important as the findings which have emerged.

Entry qualifications

At Bath the application data collected revealed that around 27% of the 424 applicants from regional FE colleges in 07/08 applied with predicted grades which were significantly lower than the published entry requirements: in some departments this was nearer 50%. At Bristol low predicted grades were also identified in a number of UCAS forms as the reason for rejection. Guidance managers suggested that the following issues may be factors:

- a) lack of clarity about required grades in published entry requirements

¹ For the purposes of this project, we chose not to focus on foundation degrees because FE college courses are already one of the main entry routes.

- b) where students want to stay local (an feature FE identified as on the increase), they will put in applications to all local institutions offering the course choice regardless of predicted grades
- c) even where students are advised that their predicted grades do not indicate that applying to Bristol or Bath would be a good use of a UCAS choice, the college are not in a position to prevent students from applying.

From discussions with admissions tutors it emerged that much of the initial sifting process is done on the basis of qualifications already gained such as GCSEs and predicted grades, so students are in danger of wasting an application by applying to courses where these do not match the published entry requirements.

Predicted grades

A significant number of UCAS forms received from some FE colleges showed split predicted grades in the form of A/B or D/M. In these cases admissions tutors advised that referees should take a decision about whether there was a good chance that the candidate could reach the higher grades and include this as the predicted grade. For selective courses this could make the difference between students being made an offer or not.

GCSE results

At Bath, it was found that out of the rejected UCAS forms looked at, around half were rejected in the initial sift because they did not meet the course requirement for GCSEs. At Bristol the applicants' GCSE grade profile was also a significant factor in offers not being made, and was particularly an issue with highly competitive courses where admissions tutors drill down to GCSEs in order to separate candidates.

More than one guidance manager talked about the fact that in their local area, the pupils with good GCSE results were strongly encouraged to stay on at school sixth form. Students who had done less well at GCSEs may well opt to study at college, and unless they re-sat GCSEs to get the required grades to meet some of universities' course requirements, would not be in a position to get a place. Some guidance managers reported that although students were made aware of the requirements for GCSEs in order to get into university, and evening courses were provided, it often proved difficult to get students to attend.

However, the situation does vary within the region, with some colleges requiring that students have five GCSEs at grades A-C in order to start a national diploma or A level course. In these cases, all applicants receive detailed initial guidance interviews and screening tests and will be recommended appropriate courses such as first diplomas if they do not have five GCSEs.

These findings suggest that in some cases the level of 'drilling down' to level 2 qualifications during the decision process needs to be better understood by applicants.

Unit grades

Some departments at Bath ask for all unit grades in a national diploma to be at distinction level, as well as an overall DDD profile. (At present it is possible for students to have up to three units at merit level

and still be awarded an overall DDD profile). This was seen by at least one admission tutor as placing an unreasonable burden on the students.

However, all admission tutors agreed that FE colleges could advise national diploma students to include on their UCAS form a list of the units taken and grades gained so far as this helps them to assess the suitability of applicants' preparation (some national diplomas have up to 30 optional units with students needing to choose 12 so the make up of the final qualification can vary enormously). Information about how students got on in particularly relevant units may be taken into account when admissions tutors decide on which 'near misses' will be made an offer. FE staff fed back that if distinctions across the board are required, then this should be made very clear in any published entry requirements.

Curriculum offer at FE colleges

For some degree courses at the universities, specific A levels are required or preferred, such as Economics and Maths A level for entry to courses in the Department of Economics and International Development at Bath. A significant number of the colleges we visited either do not deliver A levels at all, or if they do, may not offer the specific A levels required.

Admissions tutors responded to this by suggesting that students should include in their personal statements reference to the fact that their college context did not provide the opportunity to gain the required A levels. However, if qualifications presented are used to make an initial sift, this information would be likely to go unseen. Therefore, colleges could be advised to include this kind of information in a separate e mail to the department.

Additional A level

The requirement for an additional A level alongside the full national diploma was cited by all colleges as something which acts as a barrier to potential FE applicants. Apart from the difficulty presented by fitting in A level study along with the time-intensive demands of the national diploma curriculum and, in most cases, part-time work, we found that either A levels were not currently offered by the college, or if they were, timetabling would make combining them with national diplomas difficult or impossible.

Some academic departments at Bath explained that in order to gain the same breadth of skills as A level students studying a range of different subjects, they felt it was necessary for them to ask for the national diploma plus A level. A recent HEFCE report (2007/35) shows that 10% of BTEC ND students do take an A level alongside their main course of study, and that these students are more likely to progress onto HE. Admission tutors are reluctant to set entry requirements which are impossible for students to meet, but equally, do not want to lose the breadth of skills they know enable students to succeed on the course. One possibility suggested by an academic department is to ask for a national certificate (equivalent of two A levels) plus an A level. The 18 units required of national diploma students and the 12 units required of national certificate students are made up from the same overall list of units so, on the surface, it would seem that this would be a good solution, with students wishing to gain a national certificate simply opting for the certificate route. However, many colleges have fed back that they currently only register students for the diploma route rather than registering them for an early completion point at certificate level, so at the moment, there are fewer opportunities in the region for students to complete a national certificate than a national diploma.

As a result of our discussion, one department at Bath are considering resolving this by giving details of the particular national diplomas which may provide a reasonable breadth of skills, and including the proviso that the optional units that students take will need to be ones which provide a “high level of written and numerical skills”.

The new 14-19 diplomas, which will be delivered from 2008, will present an opportunity for students to gain more of a breadth of skills through incorporating an A level as part of the additional learning section of the qualification.

A number of Engineering departments require an A level maths in addition to the national diploma as it is seen as the only way to get applicants with the necessary maths skills to succeed on the course. Opinions of the policy of asking for A level maths varied between colleges, with around half recognising that this was a necessary step to ensuring students had the required skills, whilst the other half expressed their strong dissatisfaction at this policy referring to it as showing ‘prejudice against vocational learners’ and ‘lack of understanding about the content of vocational qualifications’. This is the kind of issue which would be beneficial to discuss at some form of regular FE/HE admissions forum.

Assessment methods

A number of admissions tutors expressed concern about the lack of assessment by examination in national diplomas. One response from level 3 vocational tutors and guidance managers was that, in their experience, students could often start on vocational courses after a less than positive experience in the school system with its associated exam system and really blossom within the alternative college system with its wider range of assessment methods including seminar presentations and project work. In their view, by the time students applied to HE they would have built up an enormous amount of confidence and be in a stronger position to tackle exams. In support of this, tutors explained that the courses such as nursing and midwifery to which many of their students progressed currently were heavily assessed through exams and although students may have experienced an element of culture shock on starting HE level study, they succeeded on the course by virtue of being strongly motivated.

In addition, FE tutors highlighted the fact that although exams may not be part of the final assessment of national diplomas, students are likely to have undertaken timed assessments under exam conditions as part of the formative assessment process.

One university academic department had carried out its own research comparing the achievement of first class degrees between those being admitted with national diplomas and A levels and had found that there was no difference between the levels of achievement.

Awareness of progression opportunities

In some subject areas, discussions with admissions tutors and FE colleges highlighted that a better understanding of the content of certain degree courses and possible range of careers they lead to may result in more vocational level 3 learners making applications to a wider range of degree courses.

At Bath this emerged in relation to Social Policy courses where discussions with a college revealed that whilst students on the national diploma in Health and Social Care were very familiar with certain professional routes such as nursing, midwifery and physiotherapy, they may be less familiar with the

opportunities which studying Social Science could lead to. This was confirmed by the regional application data which showed that no applications had been received from national diploma courses in 07/08, and the admissions tutor confirmed that only two applications had been received from national diplomas across the UK. Admissions tutors in Social and Policy Sciences were very clear that applicants coming via the national diploma route would be given equal consideration as long as they met the required grades and any additional requirements for a course such as Social Work. Subject tutors at FE were clear that these courses would be of interest to some of their students if they felt that they would be considered and had a better understanding of what the courses entailed.

Similarly, the admissions tutor for Bath's BSc Sport and Exercise Science confirmed from looking at the specifications of national diplomas in Health Science and Health Studies, that the level of science included in these courses would provide a useful preparation for his course and that lack of sports-related content in the level 3 qualification did not necessarily present a problem. His main concern is that applicants demonstrate a real enthusiasm for science. This is the kind of message which could be usefully conveyed to vocational learners at FE colleges and highlighted in university admissions information and UCAS entry profiles.

Awareness of transferability of vocational qualifications

At Bath, admissions tutors for courses like Psychology, Social Policy and Coach Education, where specific A levels are not required, confirmed that applicants from any national diploma, not just those which have an obvious subject link, would be considered as long as students met other stated entry requirements. FE guidance managers commented that it would be really useful if universities could make this level of transferability very clear for vocational learners in their published entry requirements and UCAS entry profiles.

The notion of transferability of vocational qualifications underpins the WVLLN progression agreements which both universities have signed up to in relation to a range of degree courses. More information about the progression agreements can be found at www.wvlln.ac.uk.

Careers guidance

We found that all colleges were doing a significant amount of work in the area of careers and HE options guidance, with planned cross-faculty calendars of activity including work on UCAS applications, personal statements and course choice. However, some guidance managers also expressed the view that there was some variation between the approaches of different level 3 tutors, and that in a minority of cases tutors may over ride the work of the central careers office, making certain level 3 classrooms 'difficult to get into'.

One college identified that opportunities for level 3 vocational tutors to visit and engage with academic departments would be a positive way of enhancing the information and guidance they are able to pass on to their students.

Personal contact

All FE guidance managers confirmed that a positive experience of face-to-face contact with someone from the University, especially with academics from the relevant department, was highly influential in terms of a student's decision about which offer to take up.

However, guidance managers reported that it was often quite difficult to get FE college students to attend activities arranged off campus, for example Open Days and other HEI visits. The difference between the culture of FE and schools in terms of rules and requirements placed on students could have an impact on the attendance at these kinds of events which then has an impact on the take up of an offer. One FE tutor commented that where students had already had some kind of personal contact with the subject tutor from the HEI via a college visit, they were more likely to choose to attend events at the university campus. She emphasised that it should not be underestimated how 'intimidating' a university campus can be for students who fall within the WP cohort, and that open days could sometimes feel to students like they are being 'herded around' rather than it being a positive experience.

Personal statements

At both institutions, the study of rejected UCAS forms included examples of personal statements which revealed a lack of research about the degree course content, for example, at Bristol an applicant to Early Childhood Studies referred to looking forward to the placement part of the degree when, in fact, Bristol's course does not include a placement. Admissions tutors in Coach Education and Sports and Exercise Science at Bath find that national diploma students tend to emphasise their involvement in and love of sport, rather than referring to how their previous study and current interests connect to the content of the courses they are applying for.

In the area of Social Work, the admissions tutor reported that applicants from vocational courses which involve placements are in a good position to make a strong application because of this experience. However, these vocational learners often seem to miss the opportunity of using their personal statement to demonstrate how reflection on their placement experience has led them to a wish to study Social Work.

References

The study of rejected UCAS forms included examples of references which were fairly short and lacked the type of content which would help admissions tutors to make a positive decision on applicants. For example, admissions tutors suggested that it would be helpful if referees could pick out particular units in the national diploma which related specifically to the content of the degree course applied for and comment on the standard of the applicants work in these units.

We found evidence of good practice at some colleges where quality assurance mechanisms were in place around the writing of references. However, guidance managers confirmed that tutors' approaches to writing references did vary considerably within their particular FE settings and that they welcomed suggestions from universities about how references (and personal statements) could be improved.

Foundation degrees and HNDs

Some admissions tutors reported that they received a significant number of applications from HND and foundation degree students seeking direct entry to year 3. Unfortunately, the lack of curriculum match at Bristol and Bath meant applicants could not be offered direct entry (although they would be likely to have alternative options for progression at other universities in the region).

Interestingly, a number of guidance managers asked for clarification about whether applicants with foundation degrees and HNDs would be considered for direct entry to year 2 or 3 on particular courses.

Therefore, it would be really useful for potential applicants and their advisers if the departments' admissions fact files included the policy towards particular sub-degree programmes in terms of access to years 1, 2 or 3.

Access courses

Admissions tutors' perceptions of access courses as an appropriate preparation for courses varied between departments. Some departments such as Social and Policy Sciences reported that entrants coming via access courses tended to do really well on their courses, and at Bristol the top two students in Social Policy in 2007 came from access courses.

However, at both institutions, admissions tutors in science departments such as Chemistry and Pharmacy expressed serious concern about access courses as a suitable preparation reporting that even where candidates had passed science-based access courses, they struggled with the degree course content. Two science departments at Bath have taken the decision to ask for an A level in addition to the access course to ensure that students are well prepared for their course of study. In another department, the difficulty in differentiating between applicants with access courses has led to a decision to ask for an essay as a way of determining the candidates' level of skills. From the FE colleges' perspective these kinds of additional requirements have the result of creating barriers for their access students. Increased dialogue between admission tutors and OCN South West, the validating agency for access courses in the region, could be beneficial in regards to this issue and an initial meeting has been arranged.

All admissions tutors welcomed the introduction of the new Access to HE Diploma in 2008 which aims to standardize the level of QAA recognized access courses and provide a standard grading structure. Admission tutors thought this would make them more 'fit for purpose' as entry qualifications.

The Western Access Progression Agreement involves all universities who are members of the WVLLN and aims to improve the quality of information provided between universities, access course providers and the validating agencies in a way which will result in fair, clear and explicit information being available for access course learners. The sort of information which WAPA requires universities to make available, such as possible earliest and latest times of lectures and any additional requirements on top of a pass in their access course would really help any access course student to make an informed decision.

Competition from college degree provision

At two colleges guidance managers commented that the lack of applications to particular subjects could be due to tutors positively encouraging their students to apply for the college's own level 4 provision.

Timing of applications

All admissions tutors agreed that their impression was that applications from FE colleges tend to arrive late in the cycle, and at least one department had collected evidence which verified this fact. Although all applications which arrive by the deadline are guaranteed to be considered equally, FE applicants are risking missing the deadline by applying late.

Conclusion

The report which resulted from the project was presented to the relevant university committees. The main recommendation which emerged was to ensure that the information gained through meetings with FE and HE staff was disseminated in a way which would have a positive impact on level 3 learners in the region.

The WVLLN's planned event in October 2008, "From Application to Offer", will provide a good opportunity for FE tutors, guidance managers and HE admissions staff to discuss some of the issues raised in more detail. In addition, the new WVLLN website being launched in the autumn will include pages focusing on exchanging information and good practice between FE and HE practitioners around the HE application process.