

## Tracking Project Report – Including information and discussions from the Learner Support Workshop held 4<sup>th</sup> September 2008

### Introduction

Following discussions with student services and learner support staff in Further Education Colleges (FEC) around the Hereford and Worcester Lifelong Learning Network (LLN) in the middle of 2007, it became evident that progression to Higher Education (HE) for vocational students was a concern for the FEC. Although experiences were varied across colleges and curriculum areas, there existed an expressed wish to improve progression rates to HE.

A number of the FECs already collected student data, including intended destination after level 3 study, whilst others had limited data. All staff spoken to were using or exploring the use of additional enhancements to their programmes with the intention of encouraging progression to HE (eg 'master classes', university visits).

As a result of these discussions, and building on a one-off research project at one of the FECs, a 'tracking project' was conceived. Six FECs agreed they wanted to take part and an initial workshop was held in November 2007 to discuss the project. Colleges that already collected their own data agreed to share with the project group, whilst two colleges used the survey software licensed to the LLN. With hindsight all colleges should have been asked to use the LLN survey software, as data has not been as forthcoming as was initially agreed. However an LLN colleague has undertaken a similar survey with course leaders in 5 colleges delivering vocational sports courses and use will be made of that research in this report.

### Student Intentions to go on to HE after level 3 studies

General data and discussion is derived from two colleges, but when applicable data was incorporated from the sport surveys and discussion points from the Learner Support Workshop were also included.

Students were asked about their intentions once they had completed their level three studies and overall results can be seen in the pie chart below. A high proportion (62%) indicated an intention to proceed to study in HE, which was consistent across the three curriculum areas represented (Business, Computing and Sport). This result was similar to research carried out by Colin Wood for sport (75%) and tourism (54%) students in other colleges, a finding from these surveys was that colleges which had HE provision had higher proportions showing an intention to progress.

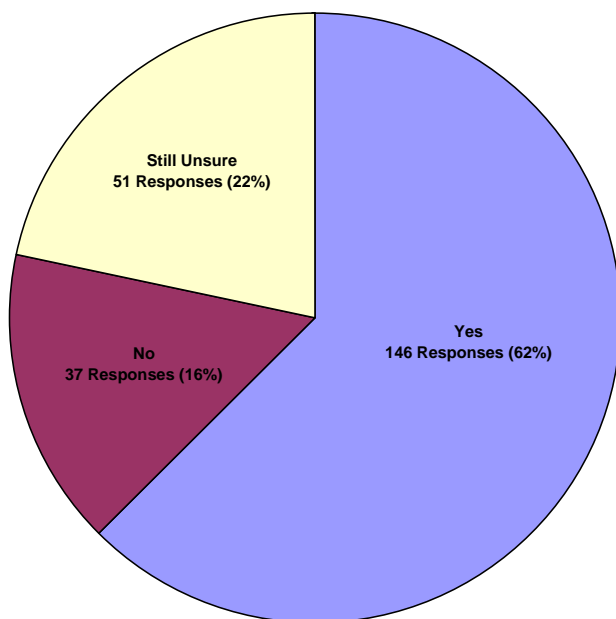
One college was able to provide data for both first year and second year students and this showed a marked difference as seen in chart below. Many first year students (32%) were unsure about their intentions in comparison to second year students when only a small proportion were still unsure (7%). On the one hand this is largely to be expected as students in their second year have to make UCAS applications, so intentions need to be clear. The additional awareness and aspiration raising activities could also have an impact.

Almost three quarters (73%) of second year students' intentions to progress to L4 were to go on to HE, predominantly to take HNC/D at the same college. This finding reflects the view that students are more likely to continue study past level three when they can remain with the same institution, as suggested by the sport/tourism surveys and in discussions at the workshop. This further reinforces the move towards partnership working on HNC/D and Foundation Degrees, where the FE partner delivers and clear progression is set in place for top-up or direct entry into a level 6 BA/BSc. One college has recently introduced their 'Academy' initiative, which is aimed at retaining students at the

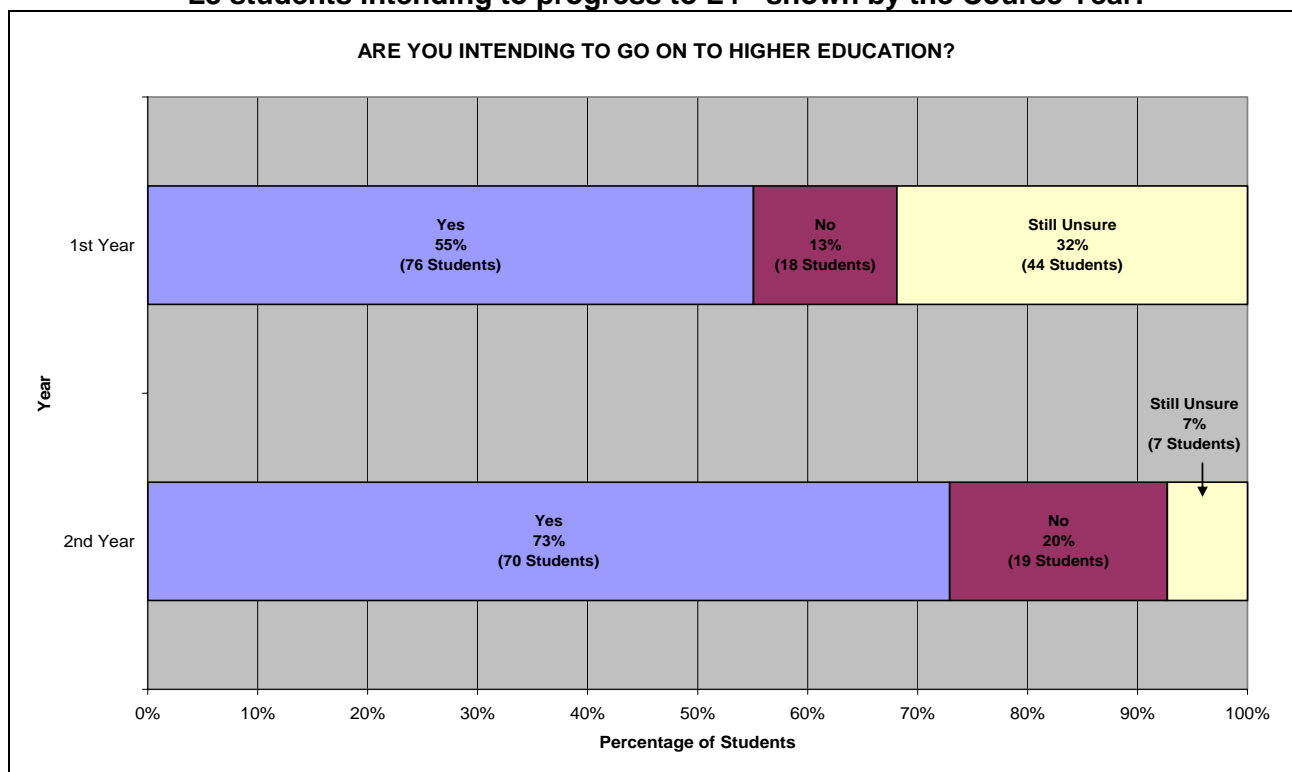
college for 5 years rather than 2/3 years to study vocationally related courses. Implicit in this initiative is the local provision of HE qualifications (in 2007 HEFCE encouraged FE colleges to develop an HE strategy and this is being reflected in increasing validation activity for provision of HE in FE).

A further consideration is what actions were taken by the college to raise awareness and confidence as part of the student experience. Colleges offer a range of activities aimed at helping students make an informed decision about progression to HE (see later discussion about programmes of activities). Student feedback indicated that these planned experiences had made a difference to their decision about progressing; staff involved also commented at the workshop that they were getting increasingly good feedback from students.

### Summary of L3 students intending to progress to L4:



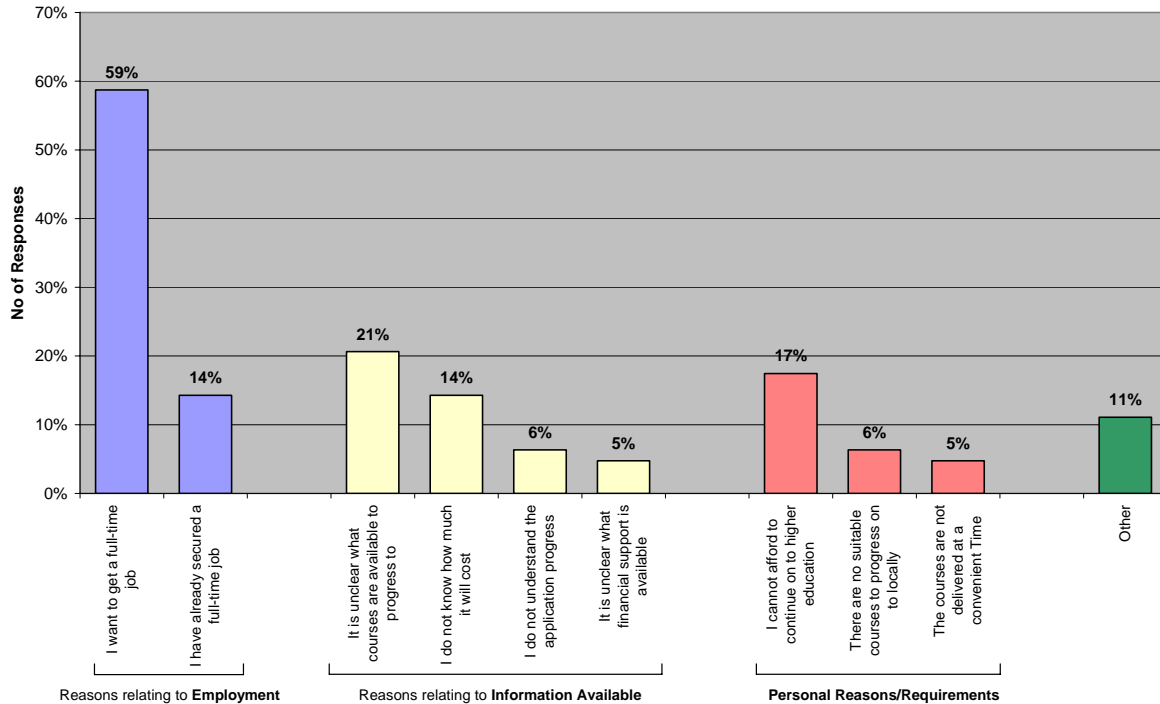
### L3 students intending to progress to L4 - shown by the Course Year:



## Reasons given for not progressing to HE

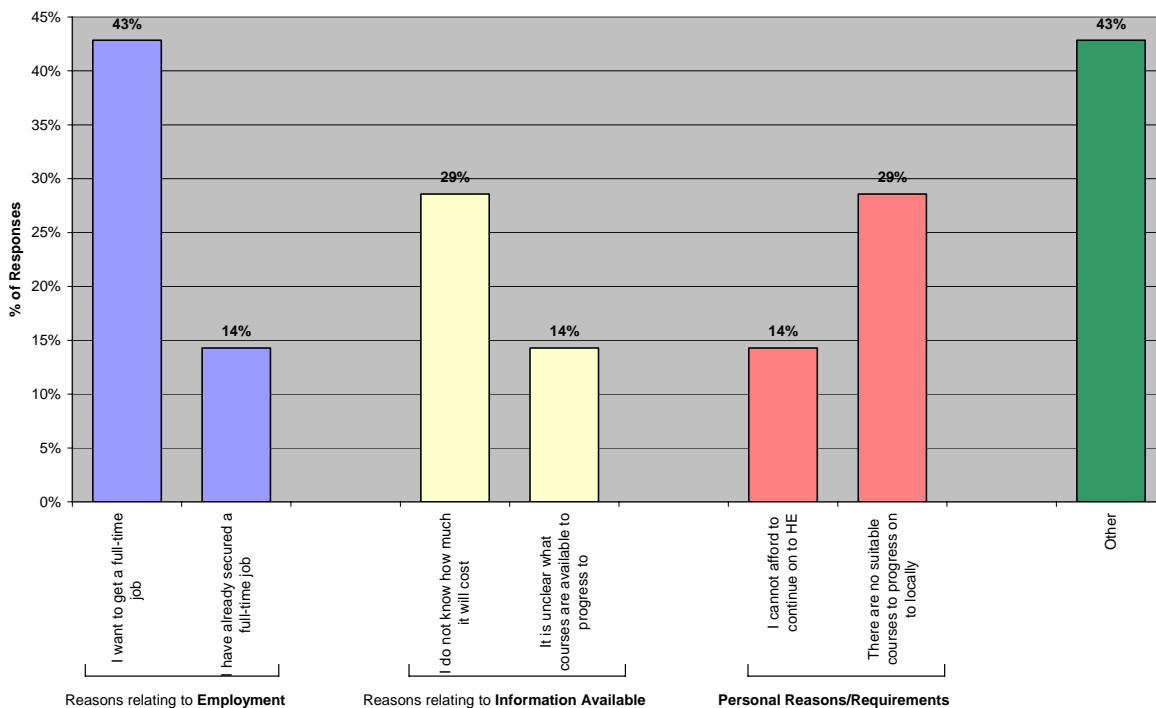
Students were asked to give the reason or reasons for not intending to go to HE, the percentages below represent the number times that response was given. Most students gave more than one reason, often linked such as wanting to obtain work and seeing the cost of HE as prohibitive.

### Reasons given for not progressing to HE

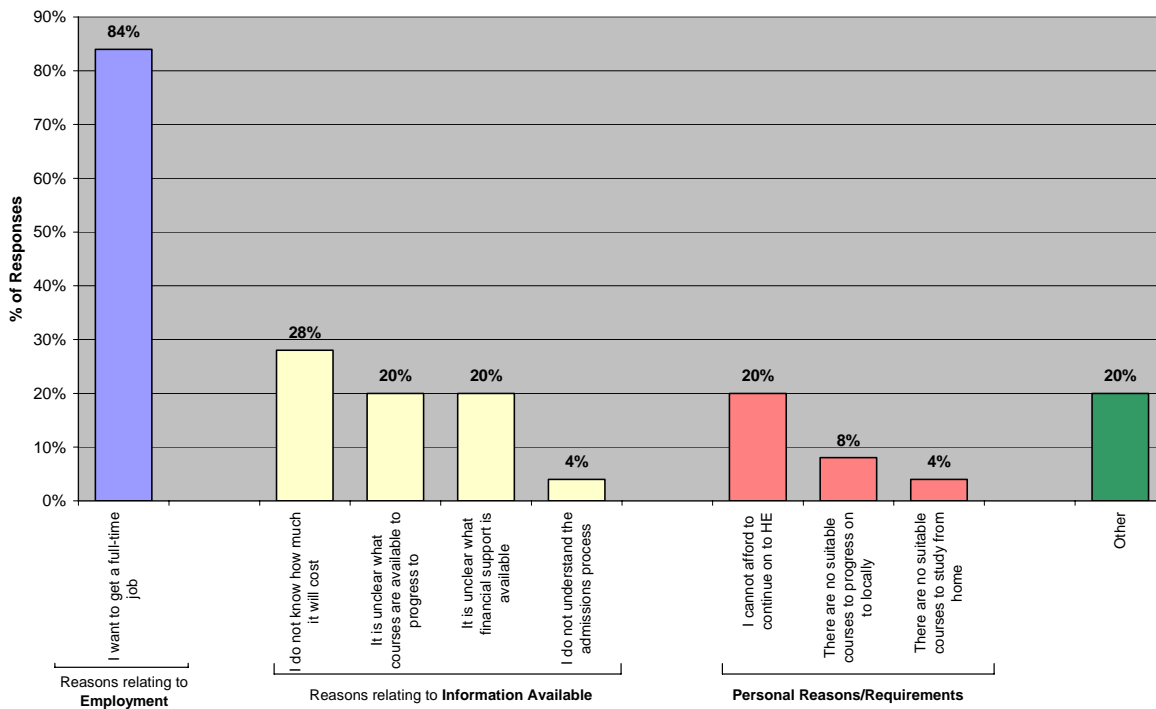


The data above showed the same broad profile as the more recent study undertaken in Sport and Tourism as can be seen below.

### Reasons given for not progressing to HE - Sports Students



## Reasons given for not progressing to HE - Travel & Tourism Students:



National surveys have tended to focus on 'barriers' to admission to HE, thus focusing on issues to do with the application process, attitudes in HE (to vocationally oriented qualifications/students) and attitudes of students about their 'eligibility/acceptance' to go to HE.

Data collected in the Hereford and Worcester LLN surveys focussed on the reasons why the student did not want to apply for progression to HE. This data can be grouped into three main areas as shown above.

### Employment/cost related

Almost half of the vocational students expressed the wish to get full time employment (or already had employment), which could link to the highest personal reason 'cannot afford to continue to HE'. Students appear to be making a choice between work and further study, which raises the question of their awareness to work-based opportunities to study (eg Foundation Degrees and HNDs). This level of information was not obtained, but could be the basis of further surveys and links to 'Information Available' to both students and FE staff.

The cost of going to HE is clearly having an impact on students in the vocationally related areas and is often given as a reason for not going to HE despite information about grants and other support being given as part of the additional programme of activities given to students (see later).

### Information related

A little over a quarter of students had issues relating to the information available such as: the courses available to progress to; not understanding the application process; not knowing how much it will cost or the financial support available. Level 3 providers generally offer a range of additional sessions to students about the UCAS process and financial issues, as well as taster sessions on both HE courses and subject specific areas. In addition, one-to-one meetings are available for students and will depend upon the student taking up the opportunity. Given that colleges do have these additional programmes of activity, either respondents did not attend sessions (in some colleges the sessions are optional, whilst other colleges have them as part of the normal time table with therefore have an expectation that students will attend) or they did not understand information given.

### Personally related

Between 15% and 18% cited personally related reasons and many of the 'other' responses could be placed in the personal area. Cost figured as the highest in this category, with no suitable courses locally being found to progress to and the unsuitability of the timing of courses also being given. Some of the other reasons showed that students were going on to do another level 3 course, or were looking for NVQ opportunities through a 'secured job'. Others were looking for part time work, particularly to cope with childcare arrangements, whilst some could not cope with work and study and finally lack of support from the boss was expressed by a small number of respondents. Retention information shared at the Learner Support Workshop showed that many students who 'drop out' cite coping with the academic workload alongside their personal circumstances as the major reason for leaving.

### Students 'Lost' During the UCAS Clearing system

In a separate but related study (Tracking 'Lost Students'), students who applied through UCAS, but did not go on to university were surveyed to find out their reasons for not progressing. This was prompted by a UCAS article about 'lost' students and many of the students in the local survey proved to be 'lost' as they could not be located at their last known contact address. Despite this a small number of responses were obtained with the following results:

- Taking time out to earn and clarify their choice of course of study was the predominant finding, a high proportion saying that they intended to reapply next year
- Many said that they had changed their mind before the UCAS clearing and had not gone into the clearing system
- The major influences on students who withdrew was from family and close friends
- However, most of the respondents felt that they had made a realistic choice (at the time of submitting to UCAS) and that information, advice and guidance in the main was fine

Although the sample was small the results match with intention data obtained through the various surveys discussed above.

### Additional Programmes of Activity

Colleges differ in their approach to additional activities, some having them as an integral part of the learning programme, others making it an optional offer to students. Data was not obtained to correlate intentions against these different approaches, but it could be reflected by some of the 'information' related reasons given for not progressing.

The first set of activities is related to the UCAS application process and is offered by all colleges contacted. These are, by their very nature, self selecting for those students who intend to go on to further study and include the following:

- General introduction to HE
- The UCAS application process
- Production of personal statements
- HE Finance – grants/bursaries, student loan and some colleges give money management sessions
- CVs, covering letters and interview techniques

Some colleges undertake this with their own staff, whilst others use HE staff (either from their own college or from an HEI).

The greatest variability between colleges is in other activities offered, which can be broadly called awareness or aspiration raising activities. Such as:

- Visits to HEIs – either utilising existing 'open days' organised by HE Student Services and Registry, or making specific (often curriculum focussed) arrangements with the HEI and

particular departments. Student and staff feedback on these was generally good especially to allow students to experience the campus and hear about life at university from existing students.

- Taster days and Masterclasses – designed to give the students the experience of studying at HE level, both in terms of the environment and style of teaching. These are offered either in the college or at an HEI, sometimes both. These activities have received good feedback, especially when they involve the students in doing activities and not just listening to presentations. Excessive use of PowerPoint presentations was found, not surprisingly, to ‘put off’ some students, perhaps reinforcing the ‘HE isn’t for me’ belief that some students have.
- Use of past students to talk to groups – comments at the Learner Support Workshop indicated that this approach was very successful to hear the experiences of someone ‘like them’ who has made the transition. This was found to be particularly useful for groups of students who had no family history of HE and therefore no anecdotal experiences to draw on.
- Colleges do make use of AimHigher activity, but comments at the workshop about the targeting restricted availability to all students and it is reliant upon external funding. Generally the students found these sessions good.
- 1:1 sessions with students were offered by some colleges and one college is exploring the logistics of introducing a personal tutor system. Comments made at the workshop indicate that the uptake of this is very patchy and often it is the more aware students who do take advantage to clarify their choices of HE course or establishment. Thus the students who have decided that HE is not for them will not benefit from discussion and advice as they don’t take up the offer.
- Attendance at HE exhibitions and fairs – there was mixed feedback about these types of events, but colleges do make them a compulsory activity and believe that they are useful to show the range of opportunities available. Colleges commented that it is very dependant upon the student’s own motivation and also the influence of their particular peer group. This latter point was found to be important in the lost in UCAS student’s survey and colleagues at the workshop also said this was an important factor in student’s decision making. (In a national survey students in their first year of HE stated that friends or their peer group were a major influence on the choice of course and HEI).
- Special activities – one college bought in a team running ‘Enterprise of the Olympics’, a day of activity related to the Olympics and designed to use research and entrepreneurial skills. Although this was generally felt to be a useful day it was expensive and the college has now linked up with an HEI to run similar types of activities in the future.

### Final comments

The major reason for not progressing was found to be related to students wanting employment and/or the cost associated with HE attendance. However, at the workshop colleagues suggested that an increasing number of students completing level 3 were ‘taking time out’ to travel or work, but did have an intention to go on to HE at some time in the future. General discussions about this fact suggested that these students, when they did go to HE, were more motivated and much clearer about what they wanted to study.

This also highlights the student making an either/or decision rather than seeing the possibility of doing both work and study. This may reflect the advice and guidance given, or the influences upon the student alternatively as suggested above taking time out.

Student decision making was discussed at the workshop and it was concluded that students were influenced by family experiences of HE, where there was no experience of HE in a family student aspirations were likely to be lower. This was also the case for the peer group a student is part of, working both to encourage the choice of course and HEI and to decide that ‘HE is not for them’.

All colleges recognise the importance of providing additional awareness and aspiration raising activities, but often run into time tabling or resourcing issues (one college had to cancel a set of activities when a member of staff was off on long term sickness). Activities organised by AimHigher or the HEI are welcomed and the workshop proved useful for FE colleagues to meet and discuss issues with HE colleagues. Where activities are offered as optional the take up is often poor and

discussions at the workshop suggested that they might 'self-select' the more aware students and that those who could be encouraged or influenced don't take up the offer. One of the most successful activities (anecdotal discussions at the workshop) is the use of former students who have gone to or are at university.

### Future Actions

Since starting the project changes have occurred in the landscape between FE and HE as HEFCE have asked FE colleges to develop three year rolling HE strategies. At Worcester University a new process has been developed to discuss the development of collaborative provision at HE level which will inevitably involve learner support issues. Given the changes it is timely to ask the key learner support contacts what the LLN could do to help. This report will be disseminated through the contacts and their views will be sought about future needs, which may be more locally focussed and based on their strategic intentions.

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