



University of HUDDERSFIELD

University of Huddersfield Repository

Christie, Hazel, Cree, Vivienne E., Hounsell, Jenny, McCune, Velda and Tett, Lyn

From college to university: looking backwards, looking forwards

Original Citation

Christie, Hazel, Cree, Vivienne E., Hounsell, Jenny, McCune, Velda and Tett, Lyn (2006) From college to university: looking backwards, looking forwards. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 11 (3). pp. 351-365. ISSN 1359-6748

This version is available at <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/14038/>

The University Repository is a digital collection of the research output of the University, available on Open Access. Copyright and Moral Rights for the items on this site are retained by the individual author and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full items free of charge; copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided:

- The authors, title and full bibliographic details is credited in any copy;
- A hyperlink and/or URL is included for the original metadata page; and
- The content is not changed in any way.

For more information, including our policy and submission procedure, please contact the Repository Team at: E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk.

<http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/>

From College to University:

Looking backwards, looking forwards

Abstract

This paper reports on the first phase of a study that is investigating the experiences of a small group of students (35) that have entered an 'elite' Scottish university directly from Further Education (FE) colleges where they have studied Higher National Certificate and Diploma courses. Students' experiences and perceptions were gathered through in-depth interviews and a standardised questionnaire on entry to the university. This paper analyses the students' experiences of learning and teaching environments in FE. The students typically reported very positive experiences of their previous courses, with good support from staff and other students. A key concern for the students during their time in FE was balancing study and other commitments; support from families was seen as particularly important. Despite these concerns, the students' responses to questionnaire items relating to their approaches to learning in FE were generally similar to the patterns of responses reported by successful Higher Education (HE) students in other studies. The students' hopes and fears about HE encompassed both a sense of excitement about this stage as well as considerable fear and anxiety at leaving the highly supportive FE environment.

Introduction

Although participation in Higher Education (HE) in the UK increased rapidly during the twentieth century this transformation of the sector from an elite to a mass system has been achieved by differential enrolment from the social classes. Socio-economic groups III_m, IV and V (skilled manual, semi-skilled and unskilled) remain seriously under-represented, with less than 24% participating in HE, although 40% of young people in the population come from these family backgrounds (HEFCE, 2003). Students also enter into a highly differentiated HE system with

students in the old 'elite' universities twice as likely to come from middle or upper class families as those starting in the post-1992 sector (SFCFHE, 2004). Although Further Education (FE) colleges attract a broad range of students, transition to HE is not automatic, and most students that move from FE into HE enter post-92 universities (Gallacher, 2006). This appears to be due to a combination of students' choice of HE institution and institutions' admissions policies that make it less likely that 'elite' universities will admit students with 'alternative' entry qualifications (Furlong, 2005; SFCFHE, 2004). This is of social and political concern, since it is the graduates from the most selective universities and courses who tend to do well in later life, getting good jobs and places on the best postgraduate programmes (Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group, 2004: 11).

Scotland demonstrates both the progress made, and the persistence of inequality in access to HE. Scotland currently has a higher participation rate in HE as measured by the Age Participation Index (API) than any other country in the UK. Some 51.5% of young people enter full-time HE before they are 21 years of age, as compared with only 33% for the UK as a whole (SFCFHE, 2004). But a large factor within this success story is that about a quarter of all higher education students in Scotland are studying Higher National courses in FE colleges (SFCFHE, 2004: 91), and it is the colleges that have had most success in attracting students from a wide range of social backgrounds. Universities remain middle-class institutions where twice as many students in Scotland are from the least deprived 20% of post codes as there are from the most deprived 20% (SFCFHE, 2004: 15). Likewise, whilst only 31% of school leavers went directly into HE from state-funded schools in Scotland in 2002-03, the equivalent figure for private schools was 83% (SFCFHE, 2004: 81).

Research on students' approaches to learning and experiences of teaching-learning environments provides some insights into what may impact on the transition from college to university since students' perceptions of these environments in college and university is a key determinant of their engagement with learning and of the approaches to learning and studying they choose to adopt (Biggs, 2003; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999). The emphasis on students' own perceptions is central

here, as it is possible for students studying the same courses to react to them quite differently. Students who differ in their background knowledge of the subject area, their beliefs about learning, or their preferred approaches to learning may respond to the same context in quite different ways (Entwistle & Tait, 1990). Students' identities, and the communities to which they belong outside of HE, may also have a marked impact on how they react to HE contexts (Archer et al, 2003; Tett, 2004).

The literature suggests that the students' perceptions of assessment and feedback practices are one key area that can strongly influence their learning processes and can have significant emotional consequences (Hounsell, 1997; James, 2000; McCune, 2004). Recent perspectives on teaching-learning environments have emphasised that these are complex interacting systems in which the parts should act in concert, and in harmony with the developmental stage of the students involved, if they are to promote high quality learning and engagement (Biggs, 2003). Aspects of these systems that form students' experiences include: the ways in which students are taught, the guidance they are given about learning, and the quality of the relationships between staff and students (Hattie, et al, 1996; Trigwell et al, 1999). The extent to which students are socially and academically integrated within university may be particularly relevant to their decisions to persist or withdraw (Tinto, 1993). In the process of transition students' perceptions of the levels of freedom and responsibility they are given has been related to the quality of students' learning and engagement (Ramsden, 1997; Vermunt & Verloop, 1999; Wilson et al, 1997).

Since most students entering university directly from FE tend to enter post-1992 universities (Gallacher, 2006; Hatt and Baxter, 2003) this study is focused on the experiences of students who are unusual in that they have entered an 'elite' Scottish university. The aim of the study is to find out from the students themselves how they fare over their four years of university education and the year following graduation. In this paper, we focus on data from the first stage of this project. More specifically, we address the following questions:

1. What did the students have to say about the teaching-learning environments in FE?

2. What were the students' experiences of both formal and informal support systems in FE?
3. How did the students manage the balance between FE study and other commitments?
4. How did the students describe their approaches to learning in FE and does this suggest any implications for the transition to university?
5. What did the students have to tell us about assessment at FE?
6. What were the students' main hopes and fears in relation to their university studies?

Research Design and Methodology

Research design

This is a longitudinal study in which students are researched at key points over the course of their degree programmes and one year beyond. The study uses in-depth interviews and standardised questionnaires which were developed from questionnaires used by the Enhancing Teaching-Learning Environments in Undergraduate Courses (ETL) project (www.ed.ac.uk/etl).

Methodology

The semi-structured interviews focus on different questions at different points in time. So, the first interview was designed to create a background picture of each student's learning experiences prior to university and to explore their initial ideas about university study. This interview was carried out either in the week prior to the start of the students' university studies, or as soon as possible thereafter. Students were asked to look back on their time in FE and look forward to their time in University. This enabled the interviews to be framed around experiences of FE and anticipated differences or similarities of HE. Most of the interviews were carried out face-to-face but some of those with part-time students were carried out by telephone. All of the interviews were taped and transcribed in full.

The questionnaires used in the study are modified from questionnaires developed by the *Learning and Studying Questionnaire (LSQ)* and the *Experiences of Teaching and Learning Questionnaire*

(*ETLQ*), as part of the Enhancing Teaching-Learning Environments in Undergraduate Courses (ETL) Project (www.ed.ac.uk/etl). In this paper, we focus on the *LSQ* questionnaire that was given to the students at the time of their first interview. This questionnaire was used to explore the students' aims in relation to Higher Education and their intentions and typically ways of studying in their HN studies. The students were also asked about the frequency with which they had experienced a range of academic tasks during their HN studies.

Sample

All students coming to study humanities or social sciences subjects with HNC and HND qualifications were invited by letter in early September 2004 to self-select to take part in the study. Of the possible total group of 79 students, 35 agreed to take part, representing 44% of the HN cohort. Of these 35 students, the vast majority were located in two Schools (Education and Social and Political Studies), and within this, two degree programmes (Childhood Studies and Social Work), reflecting the bias towards these degree programmes amongst entrants with HN Qualifications.

Most of the students in the sample, as Table 1 demonstrates, are women (85%) and 63% are over 30, again reflecting the overall picture for mature students in 'caring' degree programmes. Again most (85%) are 'first generation' to attend HE; only five have one or more parent/guardian who attended university.

Table 1: Age and sex of informants (n=35)

| Age | Female | Male |
|------------|---------------|-------------|
| Under 20 | 4 | 4 |
| 21-30 | 4 | 1 |
| 31-40 | 16 | |
| 41-50 | 4 | |

| | | |
|-------|----|---|
| 50-60 | 2 | |
| Total | 30 | 5 |

Data Analysis

All of the interviews were taped, transcribed, and subsequently coded using the N*Vivo qualitative analysis package. The purpose of the data analysis conducted for this paper was to identify key themes and findings that would contribute to an understanding of what might influence the students' experiences of transition into Higher Education. The analysis process involved drawing out the major themes of the interviews and then assessing the applicability of these themes across the interviews as a whole. The *LSQ* questionnaire was coded using SPSS and was analysed to identify findings relevant to understanding the students' preparedness for the transition to Higher Education.

Findings

In this section we analyse the students' experiences of their teaching-learning environments in FE, the support they received there, how they balanced study and other commitments, the learning approaches at FE, the students experiences of assessment in FE and their hopes and fears for HE. We draw on both quantitative and qualitative data in these findings.

(1) Experiences of teaching-learning environments in FE

In general, the experiences the students had in FE were positive. The courses studied were seen as interesting and relevant to their future career aspirations. The students were clearly made to feel like individuals who mattered, and they placed great value on the one-to-one support they received from staff. As well as help with assessment, this extended to the approachability of the staff and to their willingness to support students during difficult periods (either when they struggled academically or when they had difficult personal circumstances). For example:

There were one or two occasions when I couldn't make it because, you know, I had people on holiday, somebody sick, no childcare and I just took in my children, picked up my course notes and went back away. So, they were really understanding (39).

The tutors ... would involve you. If you didn't understand, they'd take time to explain it to you (7).

Their time in FE, however, was not without its problems. While peers could be enormously supportive, some (keen) students described the frustrations of working with others who were not so highly motivated. Students coming straight from school were seen as problematic:

Most people on the course were straight out of school. I was a mature student. I had a house and a family, this was my career but for them it was a place to go after school so they didn't always hand in work on time or got half way through the course and decided it wasn't for them (41)

Overall, however, the students were enthusiastic and complementary about the teaching and learning environment within their FE College. It provided the intellectual stimulus they were looking for and, as a result, was instrumental in boosting their confidence in their ability to study at a higher level.

(2) Support in FE colleges

Overall, students described being well supported both by lecturers and tutors, by their peers and by student support services as the following quotes demonstrate.

They (teaching staff) were absolutely brilliant. ... Anything you wanted to know, ..., if the tutors were in the College, you could call them up or you could go in. ... They were always available. You know, you weren't sort of told, 'go on away and get on with it and come back like two weeks on Tuesday and I'll see you'. They were... very good. (22)

[There was a lot of support] – even my classmates supported me and I supported them. If I researched something I'd photocopy it and give it out (7).

When you first started you had to write the essays in a specific way that they wanted and I thought that was quite difficult [but I realised that] it was really just getting into the swing of writing them. We had a word with the tutor and she got someone from student services to come up and do more classes on essay writing. She was with us right through our course and she would proof read our work if we wanted before we handed it in (13).

There were also occasional concerns about assessment procedures and the uneven nature of support available. Candidate 10 suggested that the support was rather dependent on individuals:

Feedback was an individual thing. One tutor would give lots of feedback, one not very much although his was very direct – he said this is how it should be or this was great because, and the other tutor was in charge of presentational skills, communication so that was very verbal (10)

Some candidates were unhappy about the lack of objectivity in marking assignments that had been reviewed by staff prior to submission, and were critical of assessment procedures that concentrated on quantity at the expense of quality. Candidate 16 was the most extreme in these views and felt that continual assessment meant 'you couldn't really digest what you were learning' and was 'assessment times three'. She also felt strongly that assessment procedures were not objective, in comparison to procedures at university:

Also you're anonymous in university. If you disagree with a teacher in a tutorial or the person doesn't really like you, which you'll find anywhere, it didn't reflect on your grades. ... In college, I felt there was a lot of favouritism. I preferred not to get to know my lecturers in a sense I wanted my grade to reflect my work. Some of the people in the class had over-bearing personalities and they could be pushy and would negotiate grades. I think that goes against the whole system of what I think the education system is about. (16)

(3) Balancing study and other commitments

The sample students came from a range of ages and family backgrounds including: lone mothers, married women with children, and younger women living in the familial home. None of the male students had caring responsibilities. The support of families was of central importance, and they all recognised the conflicting demands of balancing work life and family life. For those women with children the support of family members was crucial to success, for example one student said 'My son and I did our homework together at the same time' (1). Inevitably the pressures of making time and space to study made some students feel guilty about taking time away from family members, especially children. Candidate 35 expresses this common tension between familial support and the effects of studying on her daughter's social activities:

Personal issues from my life were never an issue for me. I've got really good support at home. I couldn't have done it without my husband, my mum and my dad and my daughter. She had to give up things like swimming lessons, because I was not there to take her. I just couldn't do both. (35).

Guilt about the sacrifices they made came also from widely held ideological assumptions about children being best supported by a full-time mother. These gendered assumptions were

internalised by many of the women, as Candidate 03 demonstrates in discussion of the real difficulties of trying to study and be a good mother:

I was worrying about other things and then I wasn't as focused on my study. Then of course there was my daughter, not spending enough time with her, maybe getting irritable with her. She's maybe wanting more attention than I could possibly give her and I feel maybe I'm sacrificing the year. People often say to me, well I couldn't do that with a child my age because I feel when they're young, you should be giving all the time to them and oh I couldn't go studying full time now. Always making me feel guilty. (03)

It is well documented, also, that a women's return to study can put enormous strains on a relationship, especially when this requires some renegotiation of a (traditional) domestic division of labour. This is typically the case in households where the man is not supportive of the woman's return to education, perhaps because he feels threatened by it or does not like the disruption to a well-established pattern in their relationship (Bowl, 2001). Candidate 10's time in FE, for example, was marked by problems with her relationship:

We hit serious problems towards the end of my course. We actually separated and we'd been together 10 years. So I think being aware of just your relationship. I was all for giving 100% to my course and studies and tended to forget about my husband, not my children, but I think I neglected my husband. So just having an awareness of that. I think I started this year saying to myself, my marriage is not going to suffer whilst I do this degree programme. So just being aware of that because I was so focused on what I was doing. (10)

All of the women with children had returned to education at the point when they felt they could gain some (limited) independence from their children – for example when they went to school – and when they first had the opportunity to 'do what I want' (07). Despite this, they had to be enormously committed to their studies and extremely resourceful in order to free up enough time and space

away from family demands to get their work done. It is interesting to note that financial pressures were not as common-place as might have been expected amongst FE students, perhaps reflecting the better financial support for FE students in Scotland than in England (Callender, 2003), and were more of a concern amongst the lone mothers and independent women. Again, financial pressures impacted upon relationships:

Well, I've got a rented house and was in a full-time job but there's nothing really there. You just get your loan. Of course I already had a loan that I've had for 3 or 4 years which is £126 a month and on top of everything else I was trying to pay that off. I had to work all the time and didn't have one minute to myself. My partner was getting a wee bit annoyed. He'd ask if I wanted to go to the pictures or even go for a walk at night and I'd have to say "I cannae, I haven't got time!" If I was in the house I was studying and if I wasn't I'd be working. It was due to money really. (19)

(4) Learning approaches at FE college

In the *LSQ* questionnaire, the students were asked to indicate how they had approached their most recent HN studies. This section of the questionnaire comprises sets of items that combine into scales to measure the deep and surface approaches to learning, as well as organised effort. These scales are an updated version of the *Approaches to Studying Inventory* (Entwistle et al, 2003). The questionnaire items are based partly on student interview data, and partly on a body of research literature that focuses on students' perspectives on their experiences of learning and studying. Table 4 presents indicative questionnaire items to illustrate each of the scales. The approaches to learning and studying scales describe differences in students' intentions and ways of studying in particular contexts. They should not be seen as fixed learning styles or traits. Students may choose to adopt different approaches depending on their perceptions of what is required in a particular context, although they may also have preferred approaches. These scales are not mutually exclusive, for example, many students indicate that they use aspects of several approaches. In interpreting the findings from this questionnaire, it is important to bear in mind that

students may not be able to give a fully accurate description of how they have studied. Furthermore, questionnaires such as the *LSQ* inevitably simplify a much more complex underlying situation.

Table 2 Approaches to learning scales – indicative items

| Approach | Indicative items |
|--------------------------------|---|
| <p>Deep approach</p> | <p>In reading for my subjects, I've tried to find out for myself exactly what the author means.</p> <p>In making sense of new ideas, I have often related them to practical or real-life contexts.</p> <p>I've look at evidence carefully to reach my own conclusion about what I'm studying.</p> <p>If I've not understood things well enough when studying, I've tried a different approach.</p> <p>When I've been communicating ideas, I've thought over how well I've got my points across.</p> |
| <p>Surface approach</p> | <p>Much of what I've learned seems no more than lots of unrelated bits and pieces in my mind.</p> <p>I've often had trouble in making sense of the things I have to remember.</p> <p>I've just been going through the motions of studying without seeing where I'm going.</p> <p>I've tended to take what we've been taught at face value without questioning it much.</p> |
| <p>Organised Effort</p> | <p>I have generally put a lot of effort into my studying.</p> <p>On the whole, I've been quite systematic and organised in my studying.</p> <p>I've organised my study time carefully to make the best use of it.</p> <p>Concentration has not usually been a problem for me, unless I've been really tired.</p> |

Figure 1 The students' reported approaches to learning in their HN studies

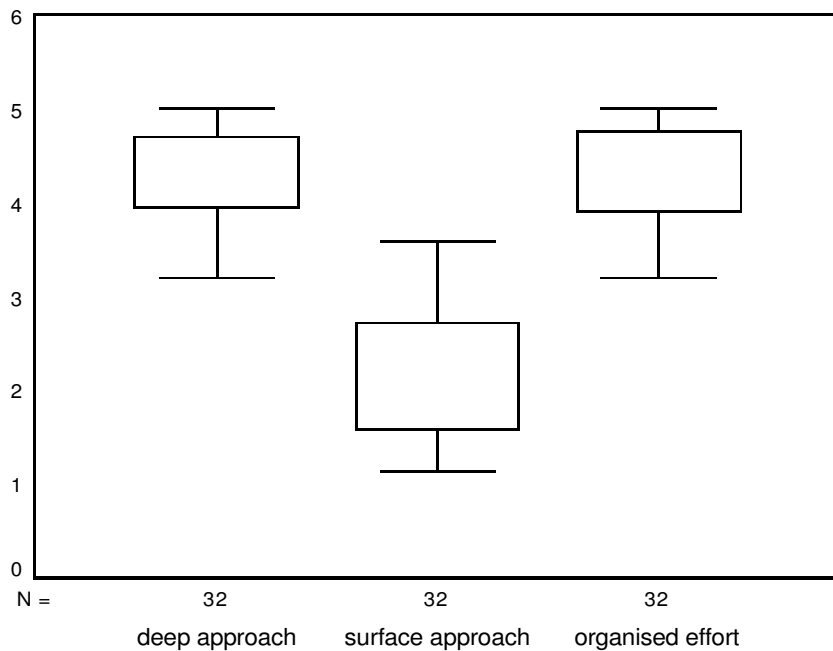
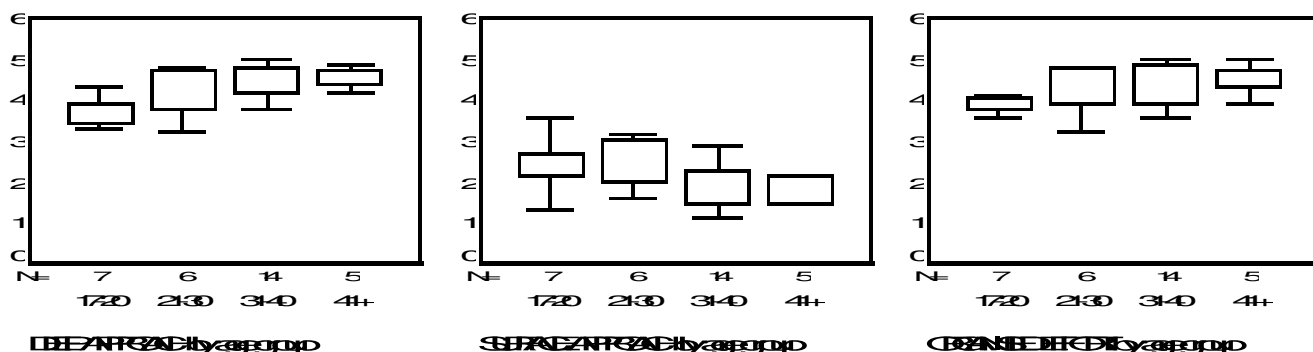


Figure 1 presents a comparison of the students' scores on the deep and surface approaches and on a third scale measuring organised effort. The picture presented by this data is positive, with the students scoring much more highly on the deep approach and organised effort than on the surface approach. This pattern is similar to that reported by successful higher education students across a range of contexts (Entwistle *et al.*, 2003).

This positive picture of the students' approaches to learning appeared to be consistent across a range of FE institutions attended (although the numbers who had attended some institutions were too small to be representative of those colleges). The age of the student had some effect on the approach taken, with older students being more likely to have taken a deep approach or organised their effort than younger students (Figure 2).

Figure 2 The students' reported approaches, by age



(5) *The students' experience of assessment at FE*

Students were asked specifically about assessment procedures, given the well-documented concerns that many (mature) students have about writing essays and sitting examinations. In over half of the cases, tutors were prepared to comment on course work before the student submitted it for formal assessment. Students valued this process, even if they did not always take advantage of it. Below are some representative quotes from respondents about the support that was available to them.

You would hand in your essay and they would get marked and you'd get a feedback form with points that were strong and points which were weaker and that you had to add. Then you would get a 5-minute consultation with the tutor of that class and she would go over it all with you Then you would go back and get a week or so to redo it and then you would get it back and it would be passed or you'd have to get it back again. That's how most of our work was assessed. (13)

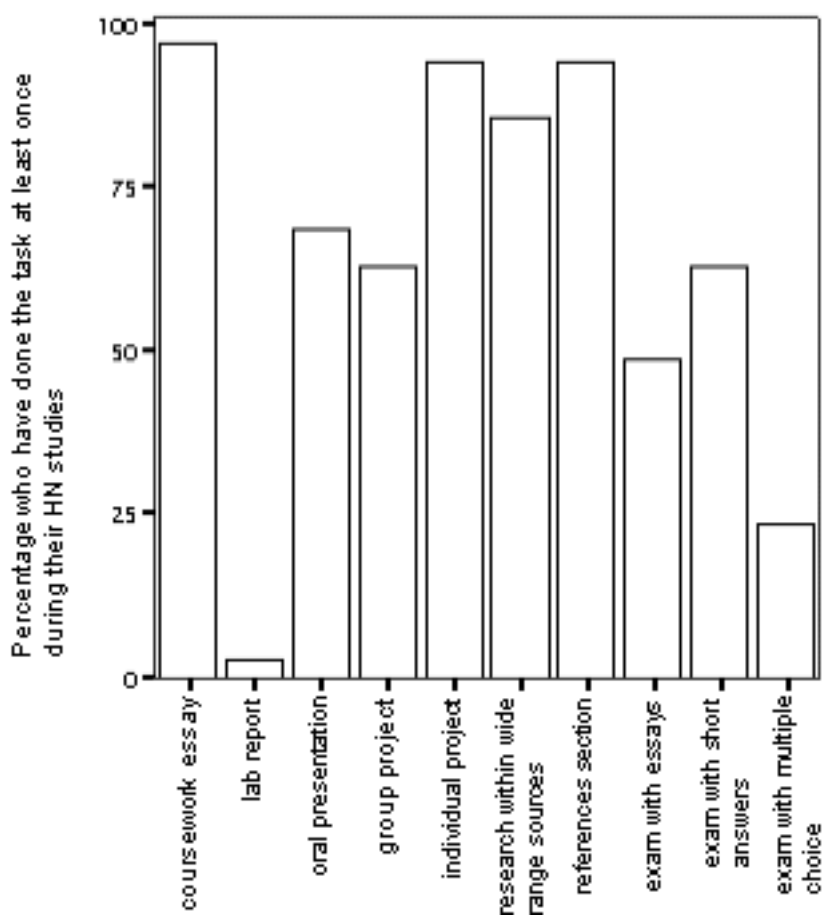
Some assessments gave you an idea of what they were looking for. Some just gave you the assessment and said 'Away and research it', which I thought was good. But we had a learning support service who were quite willing to help if you didn't understand something. I

used them a lot in my first year because I'd never written an essay in my life. They taught me how to write an essay and how to look for main points in study (7).

Every time you did an assessment within a couple of days you would get the results back or any feedback of if anyone needed any resits it was done quite quickly. So it was all done whilst you were learning the subject so that it was all fresh and they weren't leaving it to the end by which time you might have forgotten (1).

As part of the *LSQ* questionnaire, the students were asked to indicate how often, during their HN studies, they had completed a range of academic tasks. These findings are presented in Figure 2. The least commonly experienced task was laboratory reports but this was unlikely to prove problematic for this cohort, given that they were taking courses in which such reports were unlikely to be required. Of potentially greater concern was the number of students who indicated that they had not experienced particular kinds of examinations. Closer consideration of the data indicated that almost all of the students who indicated that they had done no examinations of any kind during their HN studies were students who had done a Childcare and Education HNC and were now on the BA Childhood Studies programme. As that programme does not have examinations in first year and has a route with no examinations at all, the fact that these students had not recently experienced examinations was less of a concern. Later interview findings should illuminate further whether any of the students found the transition to Higher Education problematic on the basis that they were new to some of the tasks they were required to complete.

Figure 3 Percentage of students who had done given tasks at least once



Hopes and fears about HE

The students' hopes and fears about HE combined a mix of the excitement and thrill of going to university, especially when they were first-generation to participate in HE, alongside deep-seated fears and anxieties about this next stage on their journey through the education system. Hopes centred on the opportunities HE could provide, both as a way of furthering their intellectual/personal development and as a way of beginning a new, and exciting, phase of their lives. Fears centred on perceptions of the higher standards of a university education, worries about study skills and assessment procedures, mixing with bright peers and feeling isolated.

Hopes

The excitement of the move to HE was palpable in many of the respondents' accounts. In particular they felt that the university environment would foster their deep-seated quest for new knowledge. Candidate 03, who had such serious reservations about the teaching environment (see above), expressed an admirable excitement about the opportunities to learn new things:

I think at university obviously, people are here to study because this is what they wanted to do and they have a thirst for knowledge and I think that's going to be good. Uh I think I used to, oh, I would go to the pub with them at dinner-time and I would still want to talk about the subjects we were doing. Oh, (name) would you be quiet, this isn't college now. They didn't want to carry on talking about things, they didn't want to further their knowledge of what we were talking about. Once they were at college, that was it. And I think when I come to university, obviously people are, you know they're going to want to discuss things outside college

And candidate 02, a young man, was looking forward to:

Just the whole environment of it, I really like music and stuff. I want to get involved in that somehow. I was thinking about [...] one of the societies, doing something with refugees or charity or something like that, just to experience a new type of life.

Their initial reasons for coming to HE (primarily career-enhancement and self-development) were reflected in their hopes for HE. Candidate 39 wanted:

Just the full experience of it, you know? First of all getting the first assignment over with. And then I think I'll feel a lot more confident. That growing, you know? The self-development. I'm 36 and sometimes I feel 16, so I'm looking to help my own maturity and my own self-confidence, just establishing what I know and building on that. (39)

Interestingly, the students wanted to play a full and active part in university life – going to the pub, discussing lecture material over lunch and participating in the many societies on offer. Their expectations, both of what university could provide them with and of the time they would have available for ‘student life’, were high – perhaps unrealistically so given the conflicting demands on their time (see Christie *et al.*, 2004; Tett, 2004). That said, however, they were extremely committed to university study, intensely interested in their subject area, and ready to study hard, often at some personal expense.

Fears

Having come from an extremely supportive teaching/learning environment in the FE colleges, students were concerned about how this would compare to the university environment. For example, one young man suggested:

At University you’d have to be more self-motivated. Because it was a kind of classroom thing in college and the tutor was usually there and if you weren’t working then he would tell you to work (5).

Another put it thus:

[T]he support from the teachers which I was a wee bit worried coming to University because ... like you’re sort of petted at College and then you’re thrown out in the sea and you’re left to get on with it. (01)

She went on to discuss her experience of a transition course – a course set up by the university to help non-traditional students bridge the gap between FE and HE:

Well, last week I started on the [transition] course and immediately there was a huge difference. You were sitting in a lecture theatre which would maybe seat two hundred

people, where you go from sort of a classroom environment to sitting, to a lecture group.

There's no participation, you just have to sit and listen and take notes. (01)

Real worries about the standards of work expected were common across the sample. This centred on the worries that students had about their own academic abilities *vis-à-vis* their (conventional) peers. The possibility of exclusion related to their concerns about being 'found out' when they start to work alongside other bright students who have 'five straight As' (03) and to the perception 'that everyone here is an absolute boffin' (12). Another suggested:

It will be a lot more demanding- a lot harder. The essay writing is going to be in a different way – more academic. I am used to writing how I speak and I'm going to have to change that. The time-table and amount of work will be a lot more (7).

Students also worried that they wouldn't 'fit in' with their peers (see also Christie *et al.*, 2004). Interestingly, however, the concerns about fitting in centred on age differences and not living in student accommodation rather on social class differences. Candidate 03 summed up these fears:

Am I going to be able to integrate with the younger people although I have done in the past years, it's still a worry. [...] They don't want to sit with somebody my age. Do they want to talk to me? I'm not living in [the city]. I'm not on campus so they're going to develop their own friends. I don't want to feel isolated. Everybody's going to be sitting in big lecture theatres. Of course, it's not going to be a small classroom atmosphere where you get to know people. They're obviously going to be coming to these lecture theatres with their friends, sitting in groups together. I'm not maybe going to see the same face from day to day. So that's a worry.

Worries too centred on logistics – of the potential problems of travelling to and from the university on a daily basis as well as the overwhelming sense that they did not, as yet, understand how the university works. They often described feeling 'lost' in the early weeks when the interviews were

conducted. For example: the 'library is the biggest library I've ever seen in my life' (04) and the perception that the university is 'huge, there are so many people' (09). The differences between FE and HE are summed up by candidate 13:

All the lecturers [in college] made a point of learning everyone's name in the first week. Even student services downstairs would recognise us by name. There was always someone to go and say hi or to speak to. [The University] feels so much bigger - ...it's all spread out and these people everywhere. [In] college ... you recognise people in the corridors, but here I don't think its going to be like that (13).

Discussion

This paper has reported on the experiences of an unusual group of students since they have entered an 'elite' university with HNC and HND qualifications directly from FE. Although it is a small sample, there has been little research on students' experiences of teaching-learning environments in FE so the insights gained in this research can make a useful contribution to our understanding. We have reported on the aspects of the complex interacting system that makes up the teaching-learning environment and shown that students valued highly their experience on HNC and HND programmes. They found the courses interesting and relevant to their own situation (at work and at home) and they particularly appreciated the support of teaching staff that gave them clear guidance about what they needed to learn and showed an interest in them as people. It appears that the students were socially and academically integrated into their FE environment and had been helped through this stage of their development by having sufficient freedom and responsibility to move on to the next step in their learning career. The qualitative data shows that the teaching-learning environment in FE provided students with the intellectual stimulus they were looking for and boosted their confidence to study in HE. The quantitative data on students' responses to learning, which shows that they scored much more highly on the deep approach and organised effort than on the surface approach, demonstrates their positive orientation to studying.

Managing the balance during their time in FE between study and outside commitments was particularly difficult for women with children and could put a strain on other relationships especially where there were financial difficulties as well. The students that had faced these difficulties, however, were determined, as they embarked on their university career, that they would find a better balance. Perhaps their commitment to their studies, which were mostly intrinsic, would see them through the difficult times ahead? Certainly their motivation was high in relation to learning more about their chosen subject and they were less interested in opportunities for an active social life. Of course, these issues are also affected by age and older students with caring commitments simply do not have time for anything else as our respondents so clearly described.

Moving from the highly supportive environment of FE to what was expected to be the more impersonal one of university was the most commonly expressed fear. These fears centred on the scale of the university in terms of its lecture theatres, libraries and sheer numbers of students. At the same time, the excitement of having the resources of a large university and the opportunities it provided available to them counteracted some of these fears. Some respondents were hoping that they would find themselves in a more intellectually stimulating environment than they had experienced in FE but these ideas may prove to be unrealistic in terms of the time both they, and their fellow students, have for new knowledge. At this stage of the research, it remains to be seen whether the positive picture we gained at the beginning of their university career will be carried forward. We do know, however, that their approaches to learning will stand them in good stead for the coming challenges.

References

- Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group (2004) *Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Draft Recommendations for Consultation*, London.
- Archer, L., Hutchings, M. and Ross, A. (2003) *Higher Education and Social Class: issues of exclusion and inclusion*, London: Routledge Falmer pp. 5-20
- Biggs, J. B. (2003). *Teaching for quality learning at university*. 2nd Edn. Buckingham: SRHE and

OUP.

- Bowl M. (2001) Experiencing the barriers: non-traditional students entering Higher Education, *Research Papers in Education*, 16, 2, pp 141-160
- Callender C. (2003) *Attitudes to debt: school leavers and further education students' attitudes to debt and their impact on participation in higher education*, London: Universities UK
- Christie, H, Munro, M. and Fisher, T. (2004) Leaving University Early: exploring the differences between continuing and non-continuing students, *Studies in higher Education*, 29, 5, pp 587-604
- Entwistle, N., McCune, V. and Hounsell, J. (2003). Investigating ways of enhancing university teaching-learning environments: measuring students' approaches to studying and perceptions of teaching. In E. De Corte, L. Verschaffel, N. Entwistle and J. van Merriënboer (Eds.). *Powerful learning environments: unravelling basic components and dimensions*. London: Pergamon, pp 89-108.
- Entwistle, N. J. and Tait, H. (1990). Approaches to learning, evaluations of teaching, and preferences for contrasting academic environments. *Higher Education* 19, 169-194.
- Furlong, A. (2005) Cultural dimensions of decisions about educational participation among 14-19 year olds: the part that Tomlinson doesn't reach, *Journal of Education Policy*, 20, 3 pp 379-389
- Gallacher, J. (2006) 'Blurring the boundaries or creating diversity? The contribution of the further education colleges to higher education in Scotland', *Journal of further and Higher Education*, 30, (1) pp 43-58
- Hatt, S. and Baxter, A. (2003) 'From FE to HE: studies in transition: a comparison of students entering higher education with academic and vocational qualifications, *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 5 (2) pp 18-22
- Hattie, J., Biggs, J.B. & Purdie, N. (1996) Effects of learning skills interventions on student learning: a meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 66: 99-136.
- HEFCE (2003) *Schooling Effects on Higher Education Achievement*, Issues paper July 2003/32, Bristol: HEFCE.

- Hounsell, D. (1997). 'Contrasting conceptions of essay-writing'. In F. Marton, D. Hounsell, and N. Entwistle (eds.), *The experience of learning* (2nd edn.). Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press.
- James, D. (2000). Making the graduate: perspectives on student experience of assessment in Higher Education. In A. Filer (Ed.) *Assessment: Social Practice and Social Product*. London and New York: Taylor and Francis, pp 151-172.
- McCune, V. (2004). Development of first-year students' conceptions of essay writing. *Higher Education*, 47(3), 257-282.
- Perry, W. G. (1988). Different worlds in the same classroom. In P. Ramsden (Ed.), *Improving learning: new perspectives*. London: Kogan Page.
- Prosser, M., and Trigwell, K. (1999). *Understanding learning and teaching: the experience in higher education*. Buckingham: SRHE and OUP.
- Ramsden, P. (1997). The context of learning in academic departments. In F. Marton, D. J. Hounsell and N. J. Entwistle (Eds.), *The experience of learning* (2nd Edn.). Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, pp 198-216.
- SFCFHE (2004) *Higher Education in Scotland: A Baseline Report*, Edinburgh: SFCFHE
- Tett, L. (2004) 'Mature working class students in an 'elite' university: discourses of risk, choice and exclusion' in *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 36 (2) pp.252-264
- Tinto, V. (1993), *Leaving College*. (2nd Edn.) Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Trigwell, K., Prosser, M. and Waterhouse, F. (1999). Relations between teachers' approaches to teaching and student learning. *Higher Education* 37, 57-70.
- Vermunt, J. D. and Verloop, N. (1999). Congruence and friction between learning and teaching. *Learning and Instruction* 9, 257-280.
- Wilson, K., Lizzio, A. and Ramsden, P. (1997). The development, validation and application of the Course Experience Questionnaire. *Studies in Higher Education* 22, 33-53.