



**“The Needs and
Expectations
of Higher Education
Learners in
a Further Education
College”**

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This report details the qualitative research undertaken at Havering College of Higher and Further Education (HCFHE) between January 2006 and June 2006. The research explores specifically:

- The reasons why Higher Education (HE) learners choose to study in a Further Education College, (i.e. HCFHE) and their motivations for pursuing an HE course
- The needs of HE learners within a Further Education College (FEC)
- HE learners expectations within an FEC environment.

The Research Process

The research was carried out using a qualitative research framework and employed inductive methodology. Overall, approximately 16% of all HE learners at HCFHE completed a qualitative questionnaire. Twenty-two individual HE learners from across a range of curriculum areas were interviewed. The research process also drew on existing college data, from its internal data analysis systems. Like all research processes, the project

also drew on existing research and literature to provide a range of theoretical resources within which to situate the findings.

The Research Findings

In brief the findings concern the following areas:

The motivations of HE learners in pursuing an HE course at HCFHE

HE learners chose HCFHE largely because:

- It was local
- They were seconded or sponsored
- Courses were flexible; i.e. day or evening classes or not available part time or elsewhere
- Learners had attended HCFHE before and so already “knew it”.
- Friends or colleagues had recommended HCFHE
- Financial reason; i.e. for younger learners it was cheaper to stay at home and attend an HE course and the fees were competitive.
- Learners had attended an open day and had liked what they saw.

In terms of why learners choose to pursue an HE courses, various reasons were postulated, these included:

- Enhance their learning and professional development
- Impact positively on future career aspirations and goals.

- It was “the right time” or the opportunity arose
- It was an opportunity to rectify “mistakes” made at school
- Luck or chance – employer-led initiative, or wider policy developments;
i.e. need for certain professionals to have a recognised qualification.

A consideration of whether HCFHE offers a distinct HE experience in comparison with universities

The distinctiveness of the HE experience at HCFHE was that it was:

- Local
- Familiar environment
- Learning environment positive and friendly
- Staff supportive and responsive to need
- Learners felt comfortable at HCFHE
- Classes were smaller and less impersonal
- Overall these factors helped with developing academic confidence in learners.

On the down side it was felt that compared with a university, HCFHE had:

- Less choice of courses
- Less status
- Less range of staff
- Less resources
- Noisy and disruptive learners

A consideration of the needs of HE learners at HCFHE

These included:

- Assisting learners to develop their academic writing and academic confidence
- Support with referencing, study skills, using the library and IT skills.
- Understanding learners needs around balancing life, work and studying – including considering the needs of parents
- Understanding the needs for flexible routes
- Appropriate start times of lectures, to accommodate needs of parents
- Understanding the process of de-construction, de-skilling and loss of identity that undertaking an HE course may involve in a learner
- Course structures, organisation and hand-in timetables that are realistic and achievable.
- Disability support
- Support and consideration of the needs of BME students, including cultural awareness and understanding issues of racism.
- Understanding that learners may have had previous negative experience of education
- Many HE learners at HCFHE are first generation HE learners and they may lack cultural capital.
- Learners family values may not be supportive of education

A consideration of how far these needs have been met

The majority of learners who completed the questionnaire felt their needs had been met, although a significant number felt their needs had not or only partially met. The areas where the learners' needs were not currently being met included:

- Lack of support from college staff (in particular, not enough support with essays, assignments, guidance on assessment tasks, help with developing academic confidence, lack of support for older learners).
- Lack of learning support and support around dyslexia
- More understanding from staff about pressures and demands faced by students in their personal lives.
- More detailed feedback on essays.
- Lesson contents on blackboard.
- Clear course aims and details of assignments.
- Lessons not always matched to assessment tasks.
- More books and other library resources.
- Quiet study area.
- Lack of provision for religious needs.
- Unhelpful tutor, not helpful staff, ineffective teaching.
- Ill-prepared and unplanned lectures
- Being subject to racism by tutors and peers and racism not being challenged by lecturers.

An exploration of the expectations of HE learners

The expectations of HE learners were considered in a number of ways. In brief, the responses included:

- Hard work
- Demanding
- Difficult
- Challenging
- Learning new skills and knowledge
- Staff friendly, supportive and approachable
- Atmosphere of college relaxed and informal
- Experience would be fun and enjoyable

The areas where expectations were met included:

- Good tutorial support
- Overall staff support good
- Knowledge broadened
- Meeting new people
- Local, friendly college

The areas where expectations have not been met include:

- Poor course organisation
- The course proving more difficult than learners anticipated
- Non-existent or not enough tutorial support
- The time commitment was more than anticipated
- Lack of course structure

- Poor teaching
- Inconsistencies amongst tutors
- Course materials failing to arrive in a timely fashion

Recommendations

Overall, a number of recommendations were made in light of the research undertaken. The recommendations are as follows:

1) HCFHE already has extensive data collection systems that provide each curriculum area with detailed information regarding the learners, in terms of age, ethnicity, disability and sex. This data should be used in a number of ways, firstly to target marketing more appropriately and indeed market in a way that largely meets the needs of non-traditional learners.

2) A significant number of HE learners have already attended HCFHE on a range of FE courses, suggesting that progression routes are having the desired effect. This would suggest increasing the number of progression routes into curriculum areas where currently there are none.

3) Whilst the label “non-traditional” student can be potentially pathologising, it needs to be explicitly recognised that HCFHE is successful in attracting, local, non-traditional, often first generation HE learners into the college and this requires offering study skills modules, guiding students through the often

impenetrable world of academia, detailed written feedback on assignments, one to one tutorial support and an understanding of the needs of mature students who have financial commitments and often have dependent children. An understanding is also required that entering an HE environment can cause anxiety, fear and a loss of identity, as well as offer many positive outcomes.

4) A significant number of learners live locally to the college, thus concentrating marketing locally, in a way that meets the needs of people who have little knowledge or experience of HE systems is indicated.

5) The importance of word of mouth in attracting HE learners cannot be underestimated, therefore students whose experience of Havering College is less than positive, could deter potential new learners. Thus, ensuring complaints and concerns are dealt with remains vitally important.

6) An issue that arose across all curriculum areas, was the perception by learners of poor course organisation in a number of areas, including: unclear assessment regulations or regulations that changed during the course; the need for course handbooks to be given out in a timely manner; staff absences not being covered or lectures cancelled at short notice; poor timing of modules and assessments; and poor and inconsistent teaching. It seems imperative that concerns about poor organisation require further research and continued monitoring.

7) Flexible routes appear to meet the needs of more mature learners who have financial and familial commitments. An expectation from the college

that progression may be non-linear and may include the need for deferral and re-sits of modules as the norm is indicated.

8) Balanced against the above recommendation, however, is the acknowledgement that a significant percentage of HE learners are non-mature students and thus traditional full time programmes should still be a feature of the college's output. Given the introduction of top-up fees, younger students may not have the option of attending a university away from home, due to the increased costs. This seems a likely emerging market.

8) The importance of employer sponsorship of learners on day release HE programmes (especially Foundation Degree programmes) remains crucial and should be further developed.

9) There needs to be established links between a particular course of study and an improvement in employment outcomes – monitoring of post course employment outcomes may therefore be indicated.

10) A major dissatisfaction amongst current HE learners was the lack of dedicated space available for them, in terms of quiet, study space and space to plan group work, etc. Whilst it is acknowledged that meeting the needs of all learners in an FEC remains challenging, the need for quiet, dedicated space seems crucial in improving the HE experience.

11) Whilst many HE students praised the library staff, concerns were raised about lack of books, periodicals and other library resources. Thus the issue of library stocks and resources requires further consideration.

12) There would seem to be a need to balance the preferences of the students, in terms of the need for and enjoyment in attending smaller classes with the college's need to increase HE provision. Thus the small number on some course is both strength and a potential weakness. This also implies that lectures in HE courses need to be generalists in their subject area rather than have narrow specialisms.

13) Overall, there seems scope to develop a more consistent, stronger, institutional HE ethos that permeates all curriculum areas, with a parallel development in terms of minimum quality standards.

Introduction

This report documents research undertaken between January 2006 and June 2006 at Havering College of Higher and Further Education (HCFHE). It focuses on the needs and expectations of higher education (HE) learners within the college.¹ The report outlines the background to the research being commissioned, including the wider policy contexts. The report also documents existing research into this area. It must be said at the outset, that research into the specific needs and expectations of HE learners in further education colleges (FECs) is considerably sparse and appears not to be a well researched area. It would seem therefore, imperative to undertake such research to ensure that HE education policy reflects the realities of HE delivery modes and provision – not only in Universities but FECs, an often unrecognised and under-valued provider of higher education in Britain today. Indeed it is argued that "much of this [HE] activity has been hidden from history and policy" (Parry and Thompson, 2001). This is despite an estimation that in 2003, 12% of higher HE learners in Great Britain, were attending FECs (LSC and HEFCE, 2003)

The report discusses the mode of research, its design, implementation and methodological issues. The report also documents the devising of the research questions and the ethical issues that arose. The research is designed largely within a qualitative framework but also draws on a

¹ HE refers to only those courses that are considered "prescribed" that is, funded by HEFCE. The college also offers a range of non-prescribed HE courses however these have been exempt from the research process.

quantitative/qualitative mixed method approach. The research aims to both make generalised assertions about HE learners' needs and expectations and attempts to represent and portray the authentic "voices" of learners. The research is also largely inductive, again to enable the current experience of HE learners to be "heard".

The data gathered has been critically analysed and appraised and a series of recommendations have been made. It would seem that HE activity in FECs generally remains somewhat insecure. This is particularly so in HCFHE, given the current internal and external concerns. A starting point in this discussion therefore, concerns a brief overview of Havering College of Higher and Further Education, which includes a consideration of who are the HE learners, exploring issues of age, ethnicity and sex.

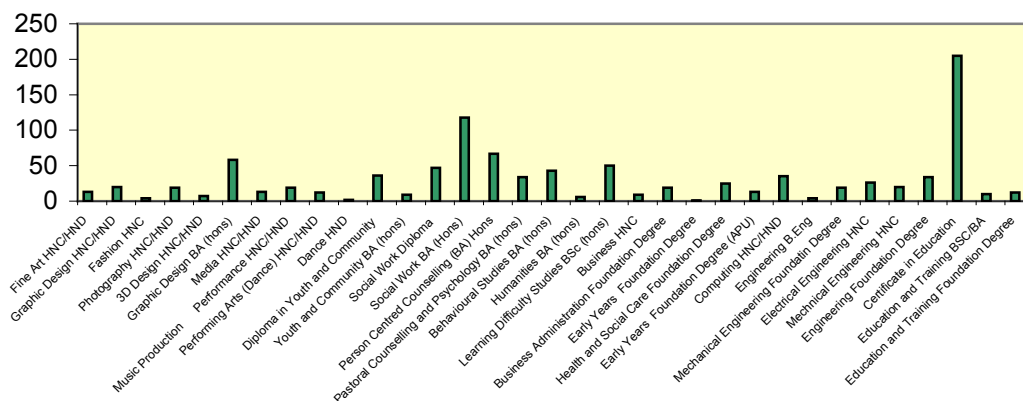
Introduction to Havering College of Further and Higher Education

HCFHE is based across a number of sites in the London Borough of Havering, London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, Essex County Council, and Brentwood Borough Council. As its name suggests, Havering College offers both FE and HE provision. The FE output is considerably diverse, offering daytime and evening courses in a broad variety of subjects, offered across a range of FE qualifications. Current FE enrolments numbers stand at 19,302, which accounts for some 9215 actual students. (HCFHE, 2006)

HCFHE has had a relatively long history offering HE provision, most notably, teacher training and social work. Indeed, social work training has been provided by the college since 1976, at that time, in the form of the Certificate of Social Services (Spilman, 2006). HCFHE has also had historical links with Garnett College (now Greenwich University), in terms of teacher training (Morris, 2006). The college has expanded its HE provision considerably in the last 5 years (Morris, 2006) in a diverse range of areas, including Fine Art, Graphic Design, Pastoral Counselling, Business, Health and Social Care and Mechanical Engineering to name but a few. A wide range of HE qualifications are also offered which include, Higher National Certificates (HNC), Higher National Diplomas (HND), BA (Hons), BSc (Hons), Certificate courses (equivalent to the first year of a degree), Post Graduate Certificate Courses, Foundation Degrees and Diplomas in Higher Education.

HCFHE also offer a range of programme delivery methods, including full, part time courses and distance learning. There are currently, a total of 1027 enrolments which account for 1007 (HCFHE, 2006) individual students on HE courses within the college, with this provision accounting for approximately 12-15% of the total college educational business (Morris, 2006). These 1000 plus enrolments are spread across curriculum areas as follows:

Current HE Enrolments



It can be seen therefore that HCFHE has a large HE output which is not typical in FECs. Indeed a very brief exploration of HE provision in other London FECs carried out by the author of this report revealed that HE provision often comprised a very small percentage of colleges total educational output and appeared very limited in terms of range of qualifications and subjects offered. For example, Southwark College's HE output related to a one course, a Foundation Degree in Childcare (2005). City and Islington College total HE enrolments, whilst higher than Southwark College, was 404, representing 2.69% of the colleges total educational output

(Candy, 2006).² However it is not the intention to explore HE activity in other FECs, this was merely to add emphasis to the point aforementioned, that HCFHE can be said to have significant HE provision both in terms of range of courses, qualifications and study routes and in terms of actual student numbers. The discussion now moves on to consider validation arrangements.

Validation Arrangements

HCFHE has no powers to validate and award its own HE qualifications, therefore like all colleges of HE with the percentage of HE learners under 55%,³ HCFHE is required to work in partnership with a range of Universities and other validating or accreditation bodies where required. In general there are a number of models of partnerships open to colleges, these include franchising arrangements, whereby a college does not receive direct funding from the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) and delivers the universities curriculum, to a model of direct validation whereby the college receives HEFCE funding and devises its own curriculum. The models are flexible in that there may be arrangements that fall between the two ends of the scale.

Franchising arrangements are generally seen as problematic for FECs, in that colleges preferred to have direct funding and more control over the curriculum. (HEFCE, 2003a) A number of studies have been commissioned

² These percentages have to be treated cautiously as colleges use the concepts of Full Time Equivalents (FTEs) to work out the percentage of particular course/qualification outputs in relation to all educational outputs.

³ If a college reaches 55% HE, with ministerial approval, it can become a Higher Education Institution. (LSC and HEFCE, 2003)

which critically explore FECs relationships (and vice versa) within franchising and/or validating institutions which raise interesting questions about the perception of FECs held by both universities and the general public (HEFCE, 2003a, LSC and HEFCE, 2003).

HCFHE thus has relationships with a number of universities, these include:

- Open University Validation Service (OUVS)
- Portsmouth University
- Greenwich University
- Anglia Ruskin University (formerly Anglia Polytechnic University)
- University of East London
- Sunderland University
- London South Bank University

All of these arrangements represent direct funded models of partnership with differing levels of curriculum controls and financial implications. For example, OUVS charge a one off validation fee plus an annual registration fee for individual students (Morris, 2006). This arrangement can be contrasted with the arrangement with Portsmouth University which charges 15% of the income generated from HEFCE and student fees (Morris, 2006). It can be argued that these relationships offer both opportunities and challenges to the college. A number of subject areas also have accreditation requirements for example the BA (Hons) in Social Work is validated by OUVS and accredited by the General Social Care Council. These accreditation requirements can

also add further complexity to what is already an intricate situation. HE development within HCFHE will now be briefly explored.

HE Development

Whilst the external policy context will be explored more thoroughly later on, it is important to consider what else may fuel HE development and expansion within the college itself. Some of the expansion derives from national changes in qualifications for certain occupational groups. For example, within Youth and Community work, employers are moving towards qualified status for its workers thus there is a potential new market. This is also the case for social work training, whereby the former Diploma in Social Work was replaced nationally by a degree in social work in 2003.

There is also a range of government initiatives, including the emergence of Foundation Degrees which have also impacted on HE development within the college. Development may also occur through relationships with employers – either led by the college or employers, for example there are current links with Fords and the Salvation Army. HE development can be seen therefore as labour intensive, costly and preparing for validation in itself can take up large amounts of staff time. However as research points out, these arrangements can potentially have benefits for all stakeholders (Parry and Thompson, 2001, LSC and HEFCE, 2003, Harwood and Harwood, 2004) – not least in ensuring widening participation policies are implemented. These relationships however,

are not without their difficulties or inherent inequities. The discussion now moves on to briefly consider who are the HE learners at HCFHE.

Who are the learners?

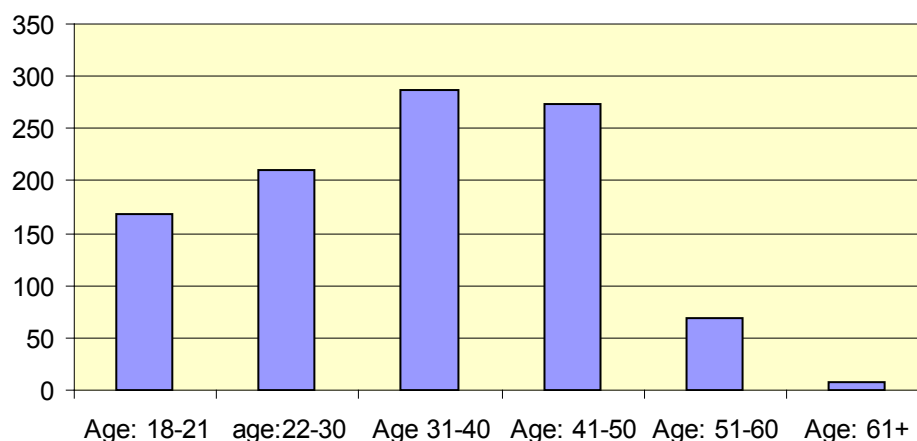
Across both FE and HE, the learners are diverse in terms of age, ethnicity, previous educational experience and where the students currently reside.

Age:

In terms of age for example, in line with current government policy, the youngest learners attending the college are 14 years of age although these learners will be attending FE courses. The majority of HE learners in the college, can be said to be “mature”, that is, over the age 21 (Thomas, 2001). Indeed, about 196 or 17%, HE learners are 21 or younger (Hollyoake, 2006) – suggesting that approximately four-fifths of HE learners are indeed mature learners. However the age of “mature status” is often contested with some writers arguing it means students aged 25 or over (Brady and Brady, 1998).

The questionnaire results revealed that the youngest HE learner was 18 and the oldest learner 64, although according to college data (Hollyoakes, 2006), the oldest learner is 74. A breakdown of the HE learners age is as follows:

Ages of HE Learners

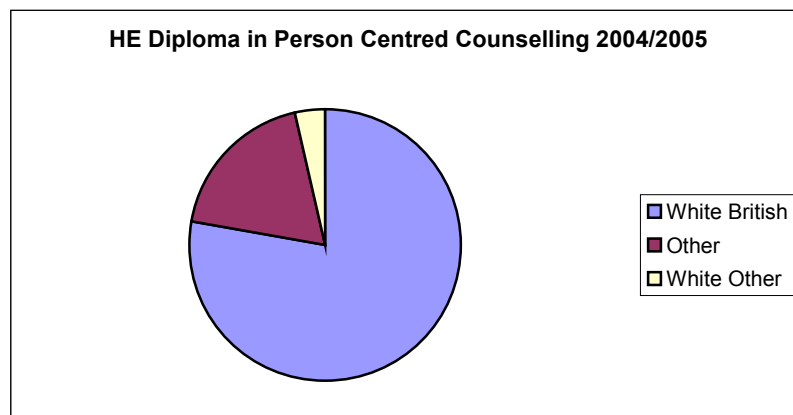


As it can be seen the majority of HE learners currently attending HCFHE are in the 31-40-age bracket, accounting for approximately 28% of all HE learners. The 41 to 50 age group is also significant and accounts for approximately 27% of all HE learners. This poses potential difficulties for the college if success is only measured in terms of the government target of 21-30 year olds entering higher education

Many curriculum areas have students that cross a wide age span although some courses seem to attract more mature students and others, much younger students; for example, the BA (Hons) Graphic Design course tends to attract more young learners, i.e. 23 or younger. This great diversity in age range of HE learners poses both challenges and opportunities to HCFHE and opportunities and raises questions about how far “age” may create distinct needs. This will be considered later when analysing the results of the empirical work undertaken.

Ethnicity:

In terms of ethnicity, whilst the London Borough of Havering and the county of Essex, are not as ethnically diverse as inner London Boroughs, HE learners' diversity in terms of ethnicity can be striking on some courses. A brief exploration of this diversity across two curriculum areas has been provided below using both HCFHE's existing EDIMS data.

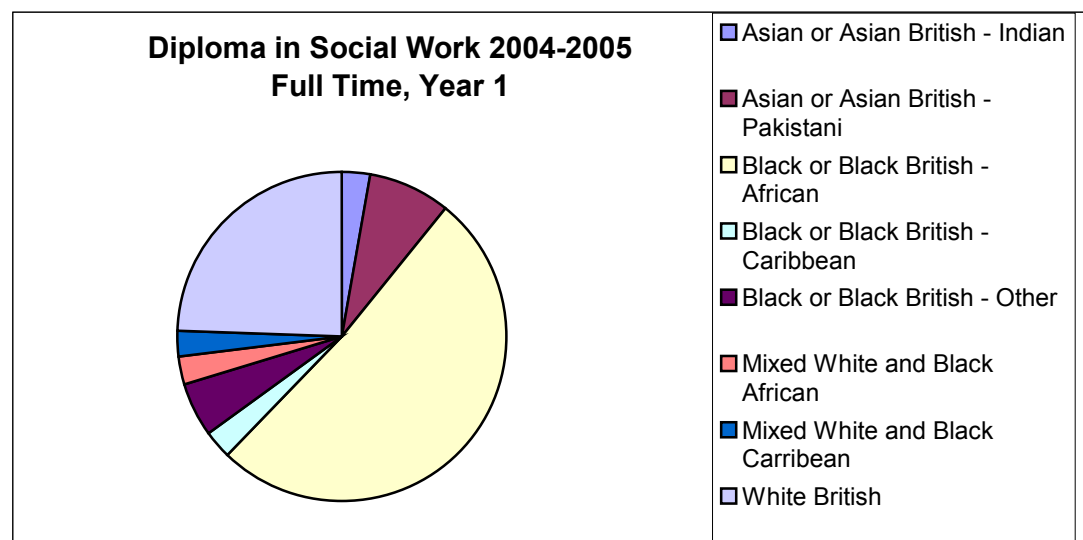


This chart shows the ethnic mix on one particular course, the Diploma in Person Centred Counselling, across all cohorts, in the academic year, 2004-2005. This clearly shows that the vast majority of participants on this course identify themselves as White British. (21 White British participants, 5 other, 1 White Other). ⁴

This programme contrasts in particular with the Diploma in Social Work Programme 2004-2005, where the ethnic diversity was more striking. The chart below details the ethnic breakdown of

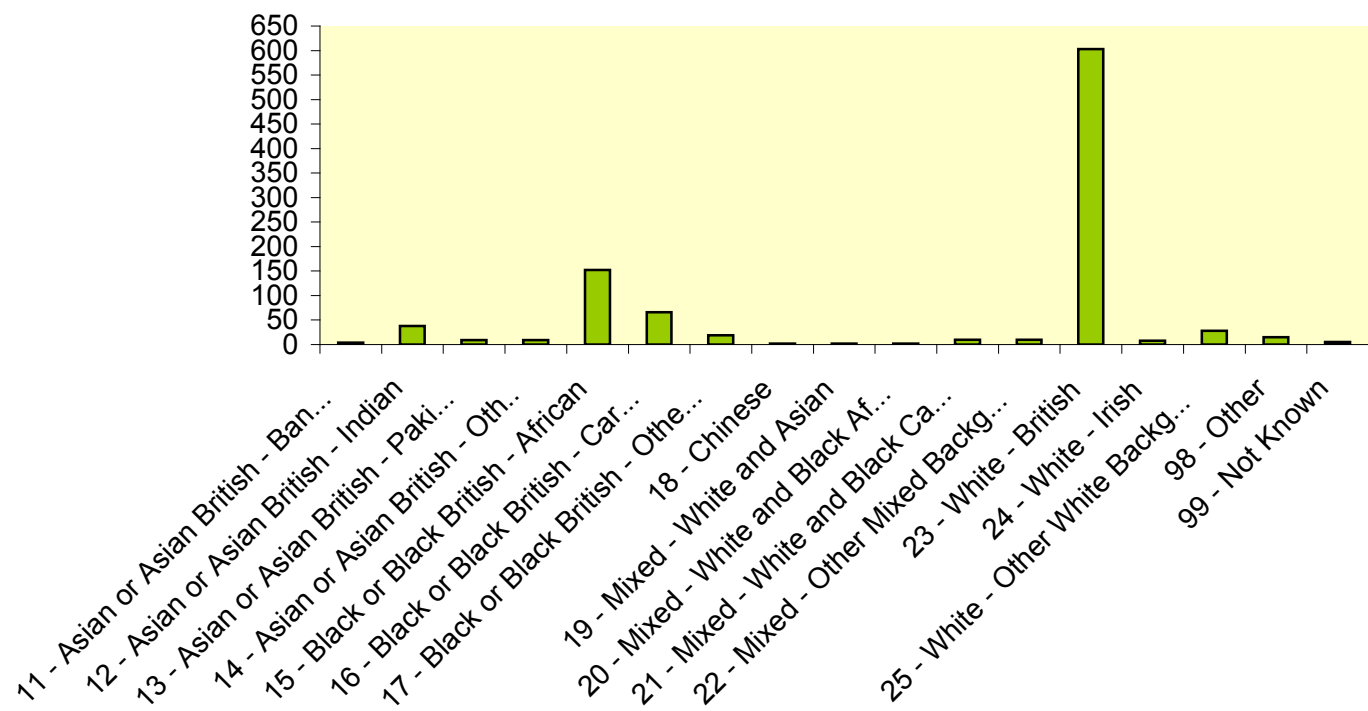
⁴ The "other" category is not detailed as to which ethnic groups it forms.

students:



As it can be seen, the largest single ethnic group, on the Diploma in Social Work (2004/2005) is “Black British –African.” The overall ethnic breakdown of HE learners across Havering College students is as follows:

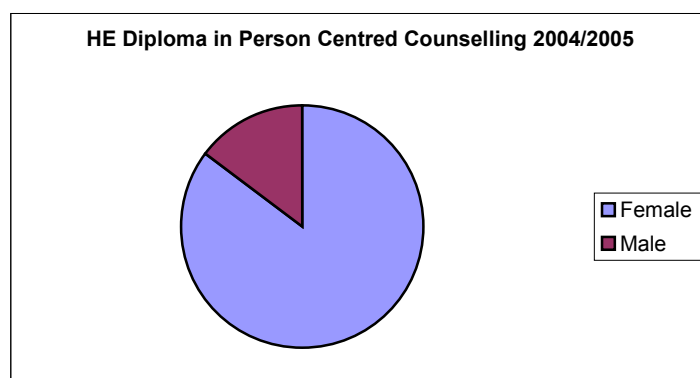
HE Students Ethnic Breakdown



The largest ethnic group of HE learners in the college are those from a White British background (603 HE learners). The second largest group are those students from a Black African background (152). White British students thus account for over 50% of HE learners.

Sex:

In terms of gender, the questionnaire results indicated strongly that the women learners outnumbered the male learners. Across the college, it is estimated that women account for approximately two-thirds of all Higher Education learners (Hollyoake, 2006). Several reasons may be postulated for this reason, firstly that given women's general disadvantage in higher education, women may be more unlikely to attend university and are therefore over-represented in FECs. It may also be that a number of HE courses in the college may be seen as more "traditionally" female; i.e. Social Work, Teaching and Counselling. Indeed the gender mix on the Diploma in Person Centred Counselling 2004-2005 across all cohorts was as follows:



This accounts for 23 female learners and 4 male learners. This can be contrasted of course to programmes that may appear more traditionally male,

such as mechanical and electrical engineering, where the vast majority of learners are male.

This brief exploration reveals that Havering College Higher Education learners are diverse, in terms of age, ethnicity and gender. It would seem crucial that analysing these “characteristics” of the learners, is the first step in the process of beginning to assess the probable needs of HE learners. For example, the issue of support for students with English as a second language, the specific learning needs of mature students, support for students managing work, study and family, and support for students who may have previously experienced education in a negative and perhaps psychologically damaging way.

In terms of prior education, most HE students within the college can be said to be “non-traditional students”. What this means, in the most basic analysis, is that they are not middle class, white, 18 year olds who have come to HE after success in GCSEs and A’ levels at school or college (Brady and Brady, 1998). Whilst this “label” has been criticised as pathologising, in that it might serve to label such students as lacking in academic ability and educational aspirations (Leathwood and O’Connell, 2003), it can also mean that the student has come from a “group” generally under represented in HE. This means people from more working class backgrounds, ethnic minority groups, or those without traditional qualifications, i.e. GCSEs and A levels. Entrance requirements for many HE courses at HCFHE thus take account of this non traditional status and do not require the same level of qualifications as a university might demand. For example, the Diploma in Youth and Community Studies

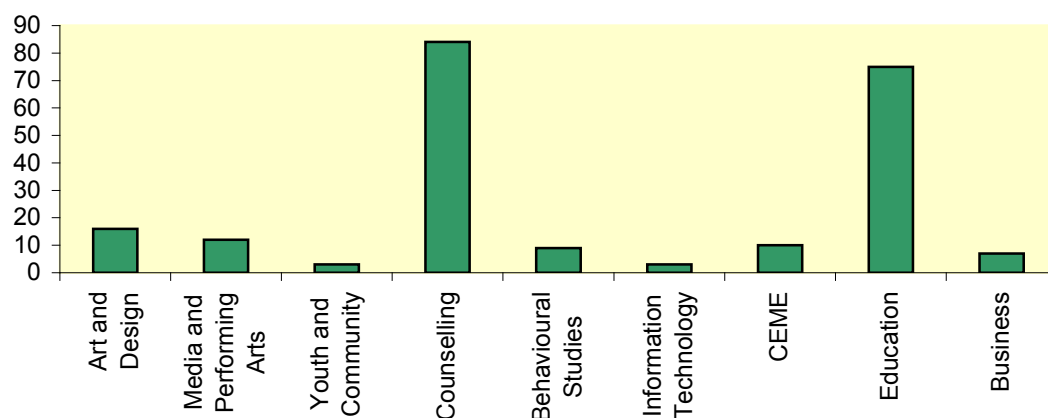
requires Level 2 Literacy and Numeracy (equivalent to O'Level/GSCE Grade C or above), as does the Foundation Degree in Health and Social Care. Some courses appear not to have any formal entrance qualifications and this can be seen as a way of achieving widening participation but equally could be viewed as problematic in that students coming onto HE courses, may not have the prerequisite basic academic skills to manage such courses. This issue will be explored further on in this report.

It would appear therefore that some HE students begin their learning experience at the college at considerable disadvantage than that of their university counterparts. Whilst it is acknowledged that making generalisations about the "type" of HE learner currently at HCFHE is problematic in many ways, it none the less focuses on what the "needs" of such learners may be and how their "needs" may differ greatly from so called "traditional" university students. Overall, given the diverse curriculum areas and the already considerable data collection processes that operate within the college, an early recommendation may include the need for such data to be explicitly analysed on a subject by subject basis to avoid problematic generalisations being made across all of the HE output. A further consideration of who are the learners is thus indicated strongly. Some of these issues will be returned to later when documenting the research design and findings. This discussion will now focus on the background to the research being commissioned from the perspective of HCFHE.

Background to Research Being Commissioned – College Context

The academic year 2005-2006, saw targets in some HE curriculum areas not being met. Indeed there was a shortfall of 212 targets, although some areas that exceeded their targets offset this figure. The table below documents the curriculum areas and numbers of targets not achieved:

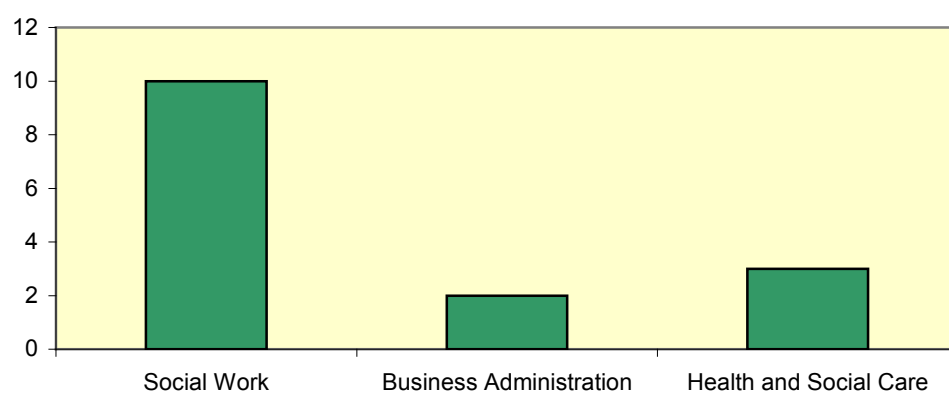
Unmet Targets



(HCFHE, 2006)

The areas where targets were exceeded are as follows:

Exceeded Targets



(HCFHE, 2006)

Overall therefore, including the offsets from those areas which exceeded HE recruitment targets, there were a total of 204 missed targets across the majority of curriculum areas (HCFHE, 2006), resulting in a significant claw back payment from HEFCE.

This has serious implications for the college, not least in terms of lost revenue but also in terms of future financial growth, stability and continued HE development. There is a strong possibility therefore, that learner numbers will be capped by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) if targets are not met in the next academic year, 2006/2007 (Morris, 2006). This will mean no further HE development in the college for the foreseeable future. This concern has perhaps conversely proved to be an opportunity to consider the needs and expectations of HE learners within the college in a more focused and empirical way. There are also wider policy initiatives and developments that have also prompted this research to be commissioned. These will now be discussed.

Background to Research Being Commissioned – Wider Policy Context

The recent Foster Report (2005) had very little to say about HE in FECs and whilst it is recognised that HE remains a minority activity within FECs, it was somewhat disappointing and added to the sense that FECs provision of HE is largely unrecognised. The message of the report appeared to be that FECs role in HE was to provide progression routes into Universities, including vocational progression routes, but not necessarily to provide HE (Foster, 2005). This would seem to be in antithesis to previous policy guidance and governmental directives. Indeed at the time of the commissioning of this research HEFCE are conducting a review of Higher Education in FECs with “the overall aim of developing a consistent and coherent policy on the contribution of colleges to HE.” (HEFCE, 2006) It may be useful at this point therefore to briefly document the rise of HE in FECs more generally and then to consider recent policy developments.

HE has generally expanded in Great Britain since the 1960s (Wagner, 1995), although some periods have seen consolidation rather than expansion. Most of this expansion has occurred within universities and the former polytechnics (Parry and Thompson, 2001). Smith and Bocock, (1999) argue however, that FECs have “long made an important contribution to higher education”. (1999:283). This they claim, has largely been achieved by providing alternative qualification routes into HE and by providing HE itself. FECs have traditionally offered HNCs and HNDs (Smith and Bocock, 1999) in what can

be considered a rather narrow cluster of vocational subjects such as business and administration, engineering, technology and building (Rawlinson et al., 1996, Austin et al., 1998).

The Dearing Report published in 1997, based on the findings of The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (Dearing, 1997a) was the largest review of HE since the Robbins Report of the 1960s (Smith and Bock, 1999, Parry and Thompson, 2001). In all, a total of 93 recommendations were made which covered a broad range of areas. In relation to FECs, recommendation 67, argued for:

- Sub-degree development and expansion
- HE provision in FECS to be directly funded
- Growth of degree level qualifications in FECS

(Dearing, 1997b)

Whilst not explicitly using the term “widening participation” the Dearing Report also made a number of recommendations that aimed at encouraging increasing access into HE. For example, the report recommended HEFCE introduced “funding weightings” (Thomas, 2001:87) to ensure widening participation. There was some recognition that widening participation would mean additional costs for Higher Education Institutions. It was also clear that development of HE in FECs might also contribute to the widening participation agenda.

Despite this policy context, which seemed on the surface to support access of non-traditional learners into HE, and in particular the push towards growth of HE in FECS, Parry and Thompson (2002) argue that the Dearing Report (1997) missed an opportunity to examine HE in FECs in the necessary depth that such a key recommendation should have entailed. Parry and Thompson (2002) argue further that FECs did not share the high rates of growth associated with HE expansion in this period. Parry and Thompson (2002) also claim that FECs role in providing HE remained "an auxiliary and ancillary one, preparing and qualifying a wider range of students for entry to HE and alongside its own undergraduate provision, easing the capacity problems experienced by the fastest growing HE establishments". (2002:2). A number of authors have also been critical of the fact that this period also saw the introduction of student loans and the abolition of students grants – thus potentially impacting adversely on potential HE learners from lower-socio-economic backgrounds (Wagner, 1995, Watt and Paterson, 2000, Thomas, 2001, Reay et al., 2002).

HE activity in FECs was estimated in 2003 to account for 12% of all HE activity in Great Britain (LSC and HEFCE, 2003) and perhaps there can be some assumed growth in the last three years. Several commentators writing during the early years of the new millennium suggested that HE in FECs was a potential growth area due to a number of factors (Parry and Thompson, 2001). One factor concerned the much publicised government target that 50% of 18-30 year olds should have a Higher Education experience (Morris, 2002).

HEFCE (2003) argued strongly that FECs were well placed to manage the widening participation agenda by their:

- Ability to offer flexible HE for students who are employed.
- Abilities in offering delivery modes that suit non-traditional learners
- Abilities in offering a progression route to FE students who may prefer a familiar college environment
- Ability in attracting local students
- Development of foundation degrees.

Indeed, as will be documented later in the report, HCFHE has been largely able to offer the above.

In terms of current policy, the government's much quoted target that 50% of all 18-30 years old should have an HE experience is still very much current. Indeed, a number of authors argue that there is no reason why HE in FECs shouldn't continue to grow (Ball, 1989, Austin et al., 1998, Fuller, 2001, Parry and Thompson, 2001). What is clear from the perspective of HCFHE education is that HE learners may fall out of the 18-30 age group; i.e. are older.

This section began with reference to the Foster Report (2005) which had very little to say about HE in FEC. HEFCE in response to the Foster Report (2005) have begun a process of consultation about the future direction of HE in FECs and are due to report soon. Policy direction at this point therefore seems to

be unclear – this poses both opportunities and threats to the continuance of HE in FECs generally and in particular HCFHE. This potential policy “crossroads” incidentally also provides a strong rationale for the undertaking of such a research project. The existing research in the field of HE in FECs will now be briefly explored.

Overview of Existing Research

In all research processes, evaluating and reviewing the existing literature is a vital component. In the context of this research project it is important to note that the literature review came after the initial research questions and design were devised – usually the process is reversed (Hart, 1998, Hart, 2001, Robson, 2002, Punch, 2005). Nonetheless, this has not adversely impacted on the overall research project and indeed, adds significantly to its inductive value base. Reviewing the literature thus provides the researcher with an overview of what has been considered previously and also provides theoretical frameworks within which to organise the research data generated.

Overall it can be strongly argued that research, which explores the potential issues faced by HE learners in FECs, is considerably sparse, if not non-existent! Conceptual frameworks have therefore been drawn from research that occurs in other contexts, for example university settings or from good practice guides and policy guidance, i.e. HEFCE commissioned research and publications. A brief overview of the existing research thus follows.

FE/HE Relationships

A range of literature both explores and documents the relationships between FECs and Universities in terms of franchising and validation arrangements. For example, (Goodall, 1995, Shackleton, 1995, Rawlinson et al., 1996, Stoney and Gaunt, 1998, Lewis and Allen, 1998, Convery and Longmate, 1998, Trim, 2001, LSC and HEFCE, 2003, HEFCE, 2003a, Harwood and

Harwood, 2004, HEFCE, 2003b). What these reveal overall are FECs dislike of franchising arrangements, which seem to benefit validating Universities and leave FECs feeling powerless. The arrangement most colleges preferred however was one of direct funding. (HEFCE, 2003a) What was of importance to note in the context of the research questions concerned a finding by LSC & HEFCE (2003) that commented on the problems of the public perception of FECs role, in that assumptions were made that FECs only offered vocational course to young people. Additionally the lack of HEI status and the complete institutional dedication to the needs of HE learners may deter potential applicants. Thus as aforementioned meeting the needs of such a wide range of learners, including age, poses both challenges and opportunities for any FEC and this view is echoed by the LSC & HEFCE (2003) report. There may be a need therefore for Havering College to continue and find innovative ways of challenging such public perceptions about its role and remit in education provision. Indeed a project that aimed to encourage Muslim women into higher education found that the recruitment literature was potentially discouraging non-traditional applicants rather than encouraging them. (Pickerden, 2002)

HE in FECs

A limited range of research considered a broader range of issues in the general field of HE in FECs. However this often focused on particular colleges, for example, (Shackleton, 1995, Walker and Reece, 1998, Trim, 2001) and focused on partnership, staff and student perceptions of HE in

FECs and more general reasons for increasing HE provision in FECs. As stated, research produced by HEFCE focused on not only partnership arrangements but good practice issues, (HEFCE, 2003b, HEFCE, 2003a). Overall the research is thin, an issue commented upon by HEFCE (2003a). This could be due to the emphasis on teaching rather than research in FECs, given that funding in FECs is not dependent on research activity unlike their university counterparts. Other research looked at the issues faced by FEC lecturers teaching across FE and HE curriculum areas (Marks, 2002, Harwood and Harwood, 2004). Marks (2002) for example, focused on lecturing staff's perception of delivering HE in an FE context and concluded that the quality of the HE provision was affected adversely by working on traditional FE patterns of teaching hour allocations. Indeed HEFCE (2003a) focus on this issue and suggest good practice would be to ensure staff delivering HE have higher remission hours. On a more positive note, both studies reported that lecturing staff enjoyed delivering HE and felt they had something distinctive to offer HE learners.

Needs of HE learners in FECs

Several research reports briefly documented or touched on the needs of HE learners in FECs. Pickerden (2002) reported on an innovative project to encourage Muslim women into higher education, through using access routes in FE colleges and community centres. The research found that the initial application forms created an immediate barrier. It was also commented upon that non-traditional students, in this case, Muslim women who are

underrepresented in higher education, often applied late to programme. This was down to a lack of knowledge of HE application systems and therefore programme convenors needed to adapt to this method of application. The report also documented the need for the curriculum to be “learner-led” and adapted to the “needs” of the participants – although frustratingly, the report does not outline what these “needs” are. There was a recognition, however; that in general non-traditional applicants will have different needs, although identifying and understanding these needs is crucial to providers of HE in non-traditional settings. Shackleton (1996) also documented the requirement for programme structures to meet the needs of adult mature learners.

HEFCE (2003b) whilst not discussing the needs of HE learners explicitly, argue that the following will enhance a learner’s HE experience in an FEC environment:

- Induction
- Links forged between HE students and local HE University students
- Good student support, i.e. language, numeracy, study skills and ESOL
- HE Handbook
- Computer based support packages
- Designated HE support staff
- Personal development plans
- A distinct HE area in the college
- On-line learning facilities

(Adapted from HEFCE, 2003b:15)

The report also suggested that colleges should develop their understanding of why students enrol on part time courses and what their expectations are. The report also urged FECs to acknowledge that learners will not all know what an HE experience is or should be and therefore require advice on HE opportunities. The report argues further that FECs should advertise and make known the distinct HE experience that is being offered. This requires colleges to understand however, what the distinctiveness is of their HE provision.

The importance of part time and flexible routes have been documented by a number of authors (Shackleton, 1995, Rawlinson et al., 1996, Pratt, 1999, Fuller, 2001, Parry and Thompson, 2001, HEFCE, 2003b). Leathwood (2003) argues that non-traditional, mature students require flexible routes to be able to continue to work and meet their financial and familial obligations. This is even more pertinent with the abolition of grants, the introduction in 1990 of student loans and the very recent introduction of top up fees.

Fuller (2001) studied mature, part time learners in a university setting, although this was not explicitly stated, and again suggests that HE activity in FECs is largely ignored by academics and government alike. The important point to note in Fuller's research is that in terms of employer funding of HE courses, there was a bias towards employers sponsoring electrical and mechanical engineering courses, the participants of which, tended to be white, young men. For those on social science courses, most students were self-funded. Fuller is thus critical of the widening participation agenda as she

feels the development of foundation degrees may create further inequalities, rather than redress inequality, as foundation degree students tend to be sponsored by their employers.

Whilst not explicit addressing HE learners in FECs but rather the interface between FECs and HEIs, Smith and Bocock (1999) explored the “characteristics” of FE learners on progression courses. This is relevant to HCFHE as a significant proportion of HE students have attended the college before as FE students. Links can also be made between what the study found and the needs of HE learners in the college, although Smith and Bocock, (1999) do not explicitly use the term “need” in their analysis. Nonetheless they found that students at FECs tended to be from lower socio-economic groups and overall lacked academic confidence. They were often the first generation of potential HE learners in their immediate families, with the exceptions of perhaps siblings having attended an HEI. As such, there was a lack of familiarity with the “academic world”, indeed this would accord with Pickerden (2002) study of Muslim women entering higher education. Smith and Bocock (1999) also found that the learners may have had a history of unstable employment, including having experienced redundancy and many had childcare responsibilities. In terms of more specific needs rather than general characteristics, students valued coursework rather than traditional methods of assessment, which served as a barrier to participation. Interestingly, they found that on FE progression courses, there was an over-representation of young males dropping out. This would seem to suggest that course structures need to be flexible to accommodate the needs of

employment and childcare responsibilities, a need to address study skills, a recognition by the college that learners lack academic confidence and to “demystify” the academic world.

Leathwood and O’Connell (2003) researched the experience of “non-traditional” students in a post 1992 university, in a longitudinal study that tracked approximately 300 students. What the study found was that for non-traditional learners, there may be a history of defers and re-takes and movement between full and part time programmes. Thus the learning progression may not necessarily be linear. This suggests that courses need flexibility in allowing students to re-sit modules and defer in order to ensure progression. This echoes the title of a paper by Reay et al (2002) that is entitled, “Its taken me a long time, but I’ll get there in the end.” (Reay et al., 2002). This perhaps entails a shift in lecturers thinking about what constitutes failure and length of time it may take an individual to complete a course. Indeed, Leathwood and O’Connell (2002) argue strongly that the notion of the ideal HE learner, as active consumers of educational services, being able to take responsibility for their own learning, who are autonomous and self-directed individuals are often constructed as a middle class white men, unencumbered by domestic responsibilities, poverty or self-doubt. This they argue is both a false and gendered Western cultural construction of an independent self. These notions, they argue, must be challenged by HEIs. They caution however against the term non-traditional learner, as it may have negative connotations. They argue instead for a more fluid and shifting

learner identity that still recognises that some learners will have a range of needs.

Reasons for Attending an HE Course

A number of studies explored the reasons and motivations in pursuing HE courses in the context of non-traditional learners. Again, this research took place in settings other than FECs, however links can still be drawn. Gorard et al (2001), in a rather deterministic argument, claims that the notion of “choice” is problematic for non-traditional learners and perhaps choice for oppressed groups is limited. However they argue that "much adult learning is self-planned, deliberate and motivated by curiosity, interest and enjoyment as much as practical considerations. " (Gorard et al., 2001)

Warrington (2003) is critical of what is termed “the second chance model”. Instead he argues that the motivations for mature learners to engage in HE include the fact that it is perceived that educational qualifications will improve career prospects and indeed will ensure the move between having a “job” and having a “career”. He argues strongly that qualifications can be seen as “cultural capital passports into education and work.” (2003:100).

Similarly Leathwood and O’Connell (2003) found similarities in their study of non-traditional HE learners in a post 1992 university. They found that motivations for study included:

- The potential to earn more money

- Making their parents proud
- Had always wanted to attend but circumstances not favourable
- To improve their self-esteem and confidence
- Interest in the subject being studied

They found some gender differences in that women were more likely to express an interest in the subject whereas men expressed their motivation as being related to improved career prospects. The study also revealed another layer of motivation, expressed by women learners, as important for their children, i.e. the process of being in a HE environment had indirect consequences for their children in that they were being en-cultured into an educational ethos as well or it was a way for the next generation, not to make the mistakes of the previous generation. (Warmington, 2003)

Indeed the link between education and improved career prospects are well documented and incorporated into much government policy – not least the Foster Report (2005) although some authors remain sceptical of credentialism. (Fuller, 2001, Gorard et al., 2001, Reay, 2001)

HE Choices

Another important area to consider is why HE learners choose particular institutions. As mentioned previously, HEFCE (2003) argue that FECs are well placed to meet the growing demand for HE in a number of ways, not least in offering local HE provision. Indeed, a local provider was cited in a number

of studies as influencing the choice of HEI. (Shackleton, 1995, Pratt, 1999, Fuller, 2001, Reay, 2002, Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003). The local connection is important in terms of work and family commitments.

Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) identified further reasons for choosing one HEI over another. A significant proportion of the learners in their study, made the choice on the basis that friends had been there before, i.e. a word of mouth recommendation. Further that they felt they would be accepted at that particular institution, that the diversity of the student population was important and that the initial visit had been positive. Other studies reported the influence of FE lecturers in helping learners through the application process and recommending certain HEIs over another – often on the basis that certain HEIs would accept non-traditional entry qualifications. (Smith and Bocock, 1999, Gorard et al., 2001, Crossan et al., 2003). Overall the research in this area remains small.

Widening Participation

Thomas (2001) argues that whilst there have been increased numbers of students participating in post-compulsory education (including Higher Education) “there are still significant variations between the participation rates of different sections of society, and the institutions and fields in which non-traditional student groups participate”. (2001:65) Two studies explored the issue of debt and its disproportionate affect on learners from working class backgrounds, Muslim backgrounds and those with dependent children. (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003, O'Hara and Bingham, 2004). This would

serve to deter people from entering HE because of the strong likelihood of incurring debt. This has implications for staff in HEIs, in that there must be an understanding of this adversity to debt and a consideration of the anxiety and distress this may cause to students and indeed the very real possibility that this could force students to leave courses. This again, would seem to suggest that part time courses, may suit the needs of these particular learners more, in that it would provide them with more opportunities for paid work – although this may impact on academic work.

Fuller (2001) and Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) both comment on reports by students that they do not "fit into" the HEI ethos and do not feel at ease or confident in such settings. A more recent study reported similar findings (Waller, 2005). Indeed Waller (2005) reports that older learners may experience a "lack of confidence or sense of disempowerment upon entering an unfamiliar and potentially threatening environment". (2005:61) Further progression from an access course into university can cause "risk, reflexivity, contradiction and confusion regarding class and other identities too. (2005:57) However the benefits eventually outweighed these anxieties and concerns and indeed Waller (2005) argues that academic success may give students the confidence to tackle problems in other areas of their lives.

An interesting study explored young men's attitudes towards participation and non-participation in Higher Education and found that young men often feared losing their identities if they attended an HEI. (Archer et al., 2001) There was a sense that HEIs were populated by middle class, "bookish" young men

and that there was no guarantee of future economic success by attending an HE course. The authors drew on discourses of masculine working class identity that appeared incompatible with an HE ethos. Thus for white, working class men there was an ingrained notion of respect in doing “manual labour”. The report also highlighted racialised discourses, in that young Muslim men associated university with learners who use drugs and alcohol and family responsibilities were more important. For young Black men, university was associated with white people, was not cool, and they had few friends who had attended. The authors report the fear of racism that had peppered the educational experiences of young black men to date. Thus the widening participation agenda may still be failing to reach certain groups. Thus FEC staff need to be aware of the “risks” associated with studying for mature learners and bear in mind that previous educational experiences may have been negative. Thus while the eventual outcomes will be positive, learners identities during their studies may profoundly shift, causing significant loss.

Overall therefore, the existing research is important in a number of ways, despite the majority of it not relating specifically to the needs of HE learners in FECs. Many of these themes will be returned to when detailing the findings of the empirical work. The report now discusses methodological issues and details the empirical work undertaken.

Methodology

This section of the discussion briefly focuses upon the methodological considerations that informed both the research questions and the subsequent research design and data analysis. Ethical issues will also be explored. A starting point therefore concerns a discussion of methodological issues.

Methodological Concerns

Methodology refers to more than the method of research undertaken but wider issues of epistemological and ontological concerns, i.e. philosophical debate about the nature of reality (ontology) and the process of knowledge creation (epistemology). Consideration of methodological issues therefore is an important consideration in any research project as it ultimately serves to “translate ontological and epistemological principles into guidelines that show how the research is to be conducted.” (Sarantakos, 2005:30)

Positivistic research paradigms, assume some objective, external truth or reality whereas phenomenological approaches tend to be based on a constructivist view of truth. From these ontological standpoints, emerge two general research paradigms, quantitative and qualitative approaches, although as commented upon by a range of authors, such polarisations are perhaps no longer relevant in a post modern era (Bryman, 1988, Cohen et al., 2000, David and Sutton, 2004) and indeed, are a false dichotomy anyway (Silverman, 1992, Flick, 2002).

In brief, quantitative approaches tend to be informed by objectivist ontology and an empiricist epistemology. Quantitative research designs therefore, tend to be based around measuring and exploring causality between set variables (Sarantakos, 2005). Qualitative approaches on the other hand, tend to explore how people “understand and interpret their social reality” (Bryman, 1988:8).

Research Design

This research project is firmly based within a qualitative research paradigm even though some “quantifying” of the research data will occur. Indeed, Silverman (1992) argues strongly that qualitative approaches do not in fact rule out “counting” (1992:176). Proponents of qualitative research argue that such approaches are useful for “analysing concrete cases in their temporal and local particularity...starting from people’s expressions and activities in their local contexts.” (Flick, 2002:12). Similarly, Sherman and Reid (1994) argue “qualitative research becomes necessary to capture...richness and complexity through its descriptive methods.” (1994:1)

It was envisaged at the design stage of the research project, that such a qualitative approach would ensure the collation of rich and descriptive data. An inductive approach was also employed – again, often associated with qualitative approaches. Inductive approaches aim at starting the research process with a degree of openness and aim at theory building rather than theory testing, inherent in deductive, often positivistic approaches (Wengraf, 2001). Thus in inductive approaches, what is of importance to the research

participants emerges (David and Sutton, 2004). This does not mean however, that there are no prior frameworks for exploration, rather, that the research instruments contain an inherent flexibility and “openness” and seek qualitative rather than numerical responses. These methodological considerations thus set the scene for the development of the research questions.

Research Questions

The original brief for the project appeared to focus around the needs, expectations and experiences of HE learners within the college. From this initial brief, a research proposal was put forward which included the following areas for exploration:

- The reasons why HE learners choose to study in an FE environment (i.e. HCHFE)
- Potential HE learners’ motivations.
- The needs of HE learners within an FE environment
- HE learners expectations within an He environment

When implementing the research it was recognised that to also consider potential HE learners motivations in the college; i.e. focusing on current FE students was beyond the scope and timescales of this project. Thus the question has been explored by considering instead, current HE learners previous educational background and qualifications, in particular, focusing on

whether the HE learners had attended the college previously. This also seems to link rather more naturally with the exploration of “choice”.

Research Instruments

Two research instruments were used for the project, a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview.⁵ A pilot questionnaire was designed and distributed to approximately 50 HE students, in the college (Diploma in Youth and Community, Foundation Degree in Early Years and Foundation in Health and Social Care). In light of the research participants’ critical comments on the design of the questionnaire and some brief analysis of the responses to the questions, the questionnaire was revised substantially. Mixtures of open-ended and closed questions were used with the aim of encouraging participants to expand more fully on their answers to the closed questions.

Questionnaire

Using the college data systems, the questionnaire was distributed to approximately one third to a quarter of all HE learners in the college.⁶ The questionnaires had individual course code and names on them to ensure a robust tracking mechanism could be employed. The numbers of questionnaires sent out to each particular course was thus noted and the returns tracked. The questionnaires were sent to the relevant Area Heads with instructions for their distribution (and return) in class. The questionnaire results were then entered into an Excel spreadsheet and analysed. In all,

⁵ Copies of the research instruments can be found in the appendices.

⁶ On courses with relatively few participants a higher ratio of questionnaires were distributed, i.e. (one third) and where courses had larger numbers, questionnaires were distributed to approximately a quarter of HE learners on those courses.

approximately 400 questionnaires were distributed and 171 returned. Thus there was a return rate of 42.7% and overall approximately 16% all current HE learners at Havering College completed the questionnaire.

The return rate was disappointing and meant that the results are focused on a fewer range of subjects, although two of those subjects, social work and education account for a significant proportion of HE enrolments in the college. It was also clear that there was a higher proportion of returned questionnaire from one campus, Quarles – again this may be due to the fact that social work and education courses run from this campus. When it became clear that not all questionnaires were going to be returned within the timescales, a more pragmatic, but less successful method was employed, in that administration staff handed out the questionnaires to a range of HE learners when they handed in their assignments. This rather desperate method did ensure some additional questionnaires were completed across three curriculum areas; Foundation Degree in Child Care, BSc Behavioural Studies and BA (Hons) Person Centred Counselling. The numbers however, were very small and yielded a total of seven additional returns.

In the latter stages of the research some curriculum areas required further questionnaires as the originals has been misplaced. These additional questionnaires were distributed without the tracking mechanisms and this resulted in a small percentage of returns being unclear as to what course they

were from.⁷ This also meant that on some courses there was a deviation in the original aim of surveying one-third to a quarter of all HE students across all courses and cohorts. .

Overall the numbers of returned questionnaires and curriculum areas were as follows:

Curriculum Area	Department	Total No's. of Learners	No. of Returned Questionnaires	% of Learners Surveyed
BA (Hons) Social Work	Academy	118	29	34%
Diploma HE in Youth and Community Studies	Academy	36	10	36%
HNC Music Production/Performance	Academy	12	3	25%
HND Music Production/Performance	Academy	7	2	35%
HNC Business	Business and Management	9	2	18%
Cert Ed and PGCE	Academy	204	52	25%
HNC Computing	Technology	11	6	55%
HND Computing	Technology	24	4	17%

⁷ For example, some returns were received that had put Foundation Degree without stating in what curriculum area, i.e. in this case they were either electrical engineering or mechanical engineering.

BA (Hons) Graphic Design Yr 2	Academy	58	17	29%
FD Early Years	Business & Management	14	4	29%
BSC Learning Difficulty Studies	Academy	50	2	4%
BA (Hons) Person Centred Counselling	Academy	61	1	2%
HNC Fine Art	Academy	5	2	40%
HND Fine Art	Academy	7	2	29%
HNC Electrical engineering	Engineering	26	7	27%
FD Electrical Engineering (Yr 1&2)	Engineering	17	8	47%
FD Mechanical Engineering (Yr 1 &2)	Engineering	38	20	53%
HNC Dance	Academy	4	2	50%
HND Dance	Academy	7	2	29%
HNC Fashion	Academy	4	3	75%

Those curriculum areas where results were not available through the original method of distribution included:

- BA (Hons) Person Centred Counselling

- BSc (Hons) Learning Difficulty Studies
- BA (Hons) Humanities
- BA (Hons) Behavioural Studies
- BA (Hons) Pastoral Counselling and Psychology
- FD Business Administration
- FD Health and Social Care
- BA/BSC Education and Training
- FD in Education and Training
- HNC/HND Photography
- HNC/HND 3-D Design
- HNC/HND Media
- HNC/HND Graphic Design

Overall this lack of return of questionnaires from a large number of curriculum areas was disappointing and various reasons can be postulated for this. Overall however, the return rate remains positive and significant for a research instrument that is well known for yielding a low return rate. (Bryman, 1989, Everitt and Hardiker, 1996, May, 2001) The results nonetheless are still significant.

Semi-Structured Interview:

A semi-structured interview schedule was also devised and participants were sought through a number of means. Firstly by indicating agreement to be interviewed on the questionnaire, (including the pilot questionnaire) and

secondly through more direct means, i.e. encouragement by lecturing staff and lastly through more pragmatic means, i.e. approaching HE students in the college environment. The interviews were taped and “accounts” rather than transcripts were made of the recordings directly onto a spreadsheet. Some direct quotes however were transcribed onto the same spreadsheet. Some of the interviews were conducted in person and others on the telephone, depending on the interviewees’ preference. In total, 22 HE learners from a variety of curriculum areas and cohorts were interviewed. These comprised learners on the following programmes:

- 1 P/T, Diploma in HE/Youth and Community Studies (Yr 1)
- 1 F/T, Diploma in HE/Youth and Community Studies (Yr 1)
- 1 Foundation Degree in Health and Social Care (Yr 2)
- 2 F/T, BA (Hons) Behavioural Studies (Yr 3)
- 1 F/T BA (Hons) Social Work (Yr 1)
- 2 F/T BA (Hons) Social Work (Yr 2)
- 1 P/T HNC Business (yr 1)
- 1 P/T HNC Music Production/Performance (Yr 1)
- 1 P/T, PGCE Yr 1
- 1 F/T, Foundation Degree in Child Care (Yr 2)
- 1 F/T, BA (Hons) Graphic Design, (Yr 2)
- 1 F/T, BSc (Hons) Learning Difficulties, (Yr 2)
- 1 F/T, BA (Hons) Person Centred Counselling (Yr 4)
- 3 P/T, Foundation Degree in Mechanical Engineering (Yr 1)
- 1 F/T, HNC Fashion (Yr 1)

- 1, P/T, HNC Computing (Yr 2)
- 1. P/T, Foundation Degree in Electrical Engineering
- 1 F/T, HND Dance

As it can be seen, the interviews captured a range of students from across a wide range of curriculum areas.

Ethical Issues

Consideration of ethical issues are a vital component in the undertaking of any research and that is because research ultimately involves collecting data from people and about people (Punch, 2005). Cohen et al (2000) caution the need for balance between the institutional need for the pursuit of knowledge and the research participants' rights. Given the researcher's role in the college, i.e. an HE lecturer, considerations had to be made concerning how far students on the course the researcher taught on, would feel able to be honest in their responses. In all, ethical considerations concern three areas, how to protect the trust and interests of the people researched, data protection and of how researchers deal with their own aims. (Flick, 2002)

In relation to the first two areas, explicit informed consent was sought from the interviewee's. The research project was thoroughly discussed, including issues of dissemination. Participants were advised that they would remain confidential in that their names would not be used and that the researcher would not reveal their identity in the context of the final report or any other future dissemination process.. In some cases however, it was recognised that

it may not be possible to guarantee anonymity, as it may be that they are the only person with particular characteristics on a course, i.e. the only black male or the only disabled person on a particular course. Indeed one participant who had initially agreed to be interviewed expressed concern about the realities of remaining anonymous, in that there were only three students enrolled on the particular course and eventually declined to be interviewed.

The interviews occurred in a private space at the college or over the telephone. All the telephone interviews were likewise conducted in a private space by the researcher. The tapes were also (and continue) to be held in a locked box. Participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the research at any time.

In terms of the questionnaire, (and like all questionnaire research), explicit consent is not often formally sought but more of a tacit agreement. It is hoped that lecturers distributing the questionnaire to the HE learners did so on the basis of learners choosing voluntarily to complete the form. Learners were advised on the form that they were not required to put their name and details of the research project were also included.

Other ethical issues, concern ensuring the well-being of research participants and of being sensitive to the fact that when discussing previous educational experiences for example, this may well raise uncomfortable and/or negative

feelings for interviewees. Indeed, “avoiding harm” is a central feature of ethical research practice. (Sarantakos, 2005)

Likewise directly approaching potential research participants posed particular ethical issues and the avoidance of harm criteria had to be maintained. This meant ensuring potential students approached in this way, were given the full details of the research process and given the fullest opportunity to make a meaningful choice as to whether to participate.

Data Analysis

The method employed for data analysis was based on “Grounded Theory” techniques. The originators of this widely used approach are Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Grounded Theory is both a research strategy as well as a process of data analysis. (Punch, 2005) although for the purposes of this project it is used for data analysis. In essence the aim of such an approach is “to generate a theory to explain what is central in the data.” (Robson, 2002:493) The theory thus emerges from the data and there are three inherent processes, namely by the researcher carrying out three kinds of coding - open, axial and selective coding. (Robson, 2002). These coding sequences aim at:

- Finding conceptual categories in the data
- Finding relationships between these categories

- Conceptualising and accounting for these relationships through finding core categories.

(Adapted from Robson, 2002:493)

Inherent in grounded theory techniques, is the notion of “constant comparison” (David and Sutton, 2004, Walsh, 1998, Robson, 2002). This means that even before the discrete data analysis process begins the researcher is constantly coding and recoding the data. In terms of the research project itself, codes were thus developed in the context of the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview data. The report now goes on to detail the findings of the empirical work.

Outcomes of Research

The research questions focused around the following areas:

- The reasons why HE learners choose to study in a Further Education College, (i.e. HCHFE) and their motivations for pursuing an HE course
- The needs of HE learners within a Further Education College (FEC)
- HE learners' expectations within an FEC environment.

Choice and Motivation

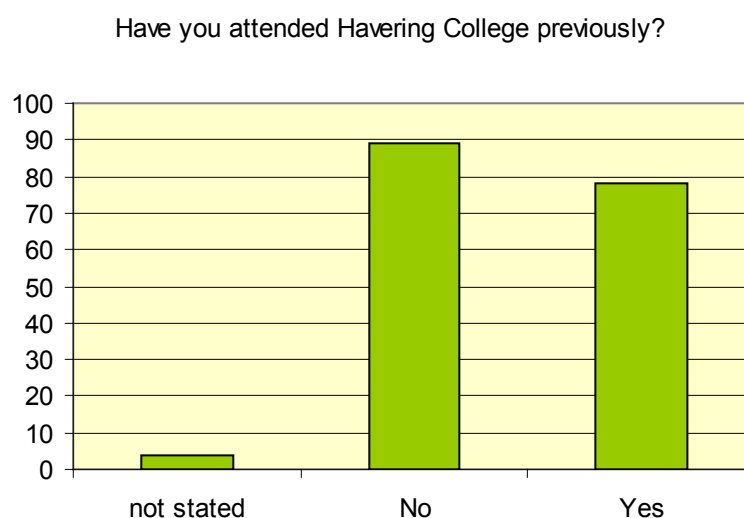
The notion of choice can be considered in two ways, firstly the choice made in pursuing an HE course and choice in terms of why specifically to do an HE course at Havering College, although sometimes the two are not mutually exclusive.

Why Havering College?

In terms of why learners chose Havering College itself, a number of distinct themes emerged from both the questionnaire results and the interviews. Overwhelmingly, the local connection was important and the most numerous reason given for choosing Havering College was that it was local. Another reason postulated by a significant number of learners was that they were either seconded, or sponsored by their employer so there was not a choice of institution or it was a job requirement. Other reasons included the

fact that the courses were flexible, in that evening or day release classes were available or that part time courses were simply not available at other institutions. Indeed a number of the seconded students attending the college on a day release programmes made the point that they needed to work as well as study. Indeed Paul, a mature electrical engineering student spoke of the insecurity created by the fact he was reliant on continuing sponsorship from his employers to continue studying and changes in the economy could have implications for the continued support. Several Mechanical Engineering students, also made similar comments in terms of continuing studying to the full honours degree that would be reliant on continued employer support.

Another reason that emerged however also concerned the fact that some learners had attended a course at Havering College and as such were familiar and comfortable with the environment. In fact this was explored via the questionnaire to understand how far being a recumbent learner was significant. The questionnaire revealed the following.



As it can be seen, 78 students had attended the course previously, accounting for approximately 46% of respondents although a higher figure, 89 students, accounting for 53% of respondents had not attended the college before. In some ways these figures are not representative due to the return rate however it suggests that students once familiar with a college environment may prefer to stay with what is known. Indeed, Surrinder, a 3rd Year degree student ⁸, stated that she had enjoyed her previous study at Havering College and that had:

“...made contacts with tutors on previous course, was a familiar building, location brilliant and felt surroundings familiar”.

Similarly, Danielle, a dance student who had previously attended Havering College as an FE student, stated that she:

“...liked Havering College before, so felt it was better to do an HE course there...I knew the environment and knew the tutors and so I knew what was expected”.

Ben, a 2nd year Graphics design student, was previously a student on a BTEC in Graphic design at the college and said that “I liked it so much I stayed on...”

⁸ Due to issues of anonymity, the course the student is on cannot be revealed as she may be identifiable.

Further reasons postulated included the point that Havering College was running the courses learners wanted to attend. Another reason stated was that friends or colleagues had either attended themselves previously or had recommended the course.

One reason put forward by the younger learners concerned finance and that their choice of Havering College was that it was local to their parental homes. Thus they could save a significant amount of money by not going away to university and, in addition, Havering College fees were also very competitive; i.e. no top up fees. The competitive fees however, had not gone unnoticed by other students. For example, Paul, discussed the issue of fees in the interview and had compared Havering College fees with university fees. He concluded that whilst studying at HE level was an expensive activity, Havering College fees were set at a more realistic level should he be required to pay his own fees in the future if his employers withdrew support.

An important response given to why people chose to attend Havering College, although one that was not given very often, was that students had attended open days at the college and had been impressed with what they had saw. For example, Angela, a younger Fashion student, had attended an open day and had visited current students in the fashion studio, she stated that:

“I went to the fashion studio and everyone was finishing off their collections and it looked so exciting...I then applied”.

Why Studying an HE Course?

In terms of the why learners were choosing to attend HE courses, the questionnaires revealed that most respondents felt that undertaking a course of HE would enhance their learning and professional development and for a smaller number would have a direct impact on their future career aspirations and goals. For example, Danny a Mechanical engineering student had been promoted “on the back of doing this degree” earlier in the year and had gone from being an hourly paid, casual member of staff with all the associated insecurities, to a “full staff member”. Danny felt that:

“doing a degree is a way to get on...and it worked...its already opening up more doors and possibilities in terms of career – I can also think about other employers now.”

Other reasons postulated were that there was a sense of it being the “right time”, for example, Sarah, a 2nd year, mature student on the BA (Hons) in Social work reported that after encouraging her own children to attend university she thought:

“it just made me think that if they are doing it [her children], why couldn't I and it got to the point where they didn't need me at home...so with the right encouragement and the right environment, I can do it.”

There was also a sense or a feeling in some respondents' comments that one should have done better at school and this was an opportunity to rectify the negative experiences at school. For example, Peter, a mature Youth and Community student, stated that despite failing A levels some years ago, he had always felt that he "had the ability to do stuff". Likewise Carol, a full time Youth and Community student stated:

"I was very bright at school so I got bored and bunked off...reports told me I was a bright but I bunked off...I just knew I could do it anyway so could pick it up at a later date."

For some learners, they had always had the idea that they wanted to continue their education and that it had always been a goal but the opportunities had not arisen. For example, Paul, a mature, seconded Electrical engineering student, who had returned to education after 18 years reported:

"I always wanted to study but didn't have an opportunity, so now I have an opportunity and its relevant to what I am doing now...so I wanted to learn more and I am enthusiastic."

Similarly, Sheila, a mature, seconded, mechanical engineering student, spoke of always having wanted to do a higher education course, although the eventual choice of course had not been anticipated. The questionnaire revealed that for some learners the opportunity had arose due to their children being older or having left home.

For a significant number of learners the choice in reality was made by employers, either having a requirement to undertake a certain training, i.e. a Certificate in Education or a Youth and Community qualification or as part of continuing professional development initiatives, although some employers were not tied into only working with Havering College.

Some of the reasons put forwards by the respondents was that of almost ending up at Havering by luck or chance. Some of this was because employers had suggested undertaking HE study and this was particular so for Mechanical Engineering students although it also related to learners on other courses. For example, Martin, a younger computing student, had never considered going to university or attending a higher education course and his family had encouraged him to get a job instead. The impetus for attending the course was purely down to his employers and he was candid that had it not been for his employers paying for his course and enabling him to have day release then he wouldn't have enrolled on the programme, although he was "glad I have done it now" and intended to continue studying at Havering College. In some ways, Martin now seemed a more "savvy" consumer of education and had picked his next course that was more readily related to his job but was not an HE course.

Similarly, Peter and Carol, both mature Youth and Community students had been encouraged by their employer to complete the course although this related to wider policy developments in the field of Youth and Community work that will require workers to be qualified. However, whilst Peter saw it as

“an opportunity to “fulfil my potential”, Carol felt she was “pushed into it by employers” but recognised that she needed to have a nationally recognised qualification and acknowledged that she had been “dragging her feet” about completing the qualification.

For many engineering students there was a clear correlation between undertaking the programme and improvements in career prospects. It was interesting to note that students on these programmes had considered the difference between undertaking a Foundation Degree and a Full honours degree. For example, Danny, a Foundation Degree Mechanical engineering student said:

“...advised that if didn’t get full degree would not get anything if dropped out, but the foundation degree felt more manageable, achievable...”,

It was positive to note that almost all the Mechanical Engineering students expressed the desire to continue their studies after completion of the foundation degree and achieve a Full Honours Degree. However for a very small minority of Mechanical engineering students, a sense emerged from their questionnaire responses that they felt they had had no choice but to enrol on the programme and this may raise potential issues about motivation to complete the studies. The same could be said of Certificate in Education

students of course, whereby the learners only have a choice of institution not of completing the course itself.

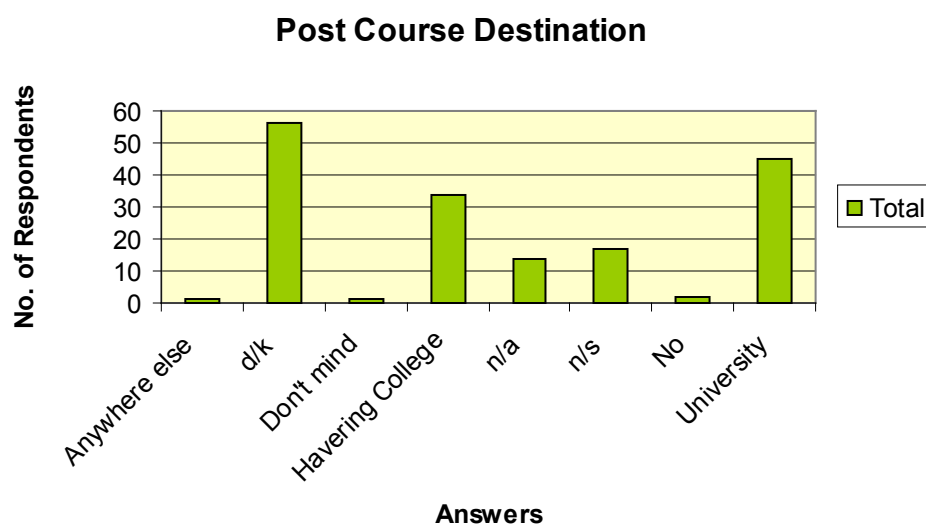
Overall learners were well able to articulate the reason why they were at Havering College but were perhaps less clear on their motivations for pursuing an HE course other than generalised accounts of it helping their future career and aiding with personal and professional development which of course are important and valid reasons.

Distinctiveness of the Havering College HE Experience?

In order to consider the notion of choice further, learners were asked in the questionnaire if they intended to continue their HE studies and whether they would prefer to attend a university or stay at Havering College. They were also asked to consider their responses in more detail and provide some form of reasoning, although many did not. In the interview, learners were asked similar questions and also asked to consider the differences between a university and Havering College, in terms of what they perceived both to offer that the other did not or could not. For some respondents, as they had not experienced university, or did not know anyone attending university they felt they wouldn't be in a position to comment. For the very small minority of students who already had already attended university they were able to draw distinct distinctions – however learners also drew on “what they had heard” from their friends or what they perceived to be the differences both positive and negative. By exploring these issues, perhaps the distinctiveness of an

HE experience in the college can be more coherently drawn out and may have also impacted, albeit unconsciously on choosing to study at Havering College. This process however, also reveals a layer of criticism about HCFHE.

Overall from the questionnaire, it seemed that the majority of learners who expressed a desire to continue their studies, wanted to do so at a university – although a significant number also wanted to remain at HCFHE. Some learners were undecided, didn’t know or didn’t state a preference. The data is shown below in a table.



Reasons given for remaining at Havering College included most significantly the localness of the college to learners. Familiarity with course procedures, the college and tutors also featured strongly in the responses. For some the learning environment was “conductive”, the staff were “supportive and

friendly” and learners felt “confident” in the college environment. The interviews revealed a number of themes. Firstly that HCFHE had smaller classes and as such offered a more personal learning environment. For example, Shazia, a mature Social work student who had already attended a university, felt that:

“the teaching is different here [HCFHE], the lectures were too large at UEL, there were too many people, you couldn’t really put your hand up to ask questions, you had to sit all the way through it...its nice here, there are smaller groups...”

Savita, another social work student had the perception that:

“...feel you get more support at College than you would do at a university...”

And likewise, Sarah, a mature social work student felt that because the college and classes were smaller:

“its best, more personal and for me that’s great...wouldn’t feel comfortable in a large place.”

Other students expressed the view that HCFHE was “friendly” and a “nice place to turn up to.” Another reason put forward was that the lecturing staff were also supportive and friendly. Michael, a seconded mature student on a

Foundation Degree in Health and Social Care, who also attended university felt that:

“You have lecturers here [HCFHE] who are prepared to go that extra mile.”

He felt that lecturers at universities were “more used to working with people who are academic”. There were some sentiments expressed that suggested that HCFHE was more suited to so called less academically able students, for example, comments were made that “I’m not so academic.” Other reasons suggested was the availability of one to one tutorials and lecturing staff that were “on hand” and “responsive” to students concerns and queries.

For example, Rebecca a mature, sponsored student on a Foundation Degree in Childcare, felt the atmosphere was “like a family”. She stated that:

“the tutors are on hand, you can email them and they respond or you can say, can I pop in and see you...you can have individual tutorials...the feeling I get with APU... is that there is less time for students to meet with the tutor and I just need that reassurance that I am doing it right...”

Similarly, Shazia stated that her tutor was “fantastic” and Surrinder on her previous course at Havering College had felt that support had been available when she required it. In the same vein, Paul, a mature electrical engineering

student commented he felt lecturers were more supportive than their university counterparts and that:

“I feel I get more time from Havering College lecturers...feel they might be more approachable...not been to a university but having talked to people, that’s what they say.”

Angela, a fashion student stated:

“We have a small class so feel we get good support and one to one tutoring which you wouldn’t get in a university.”

Overall therefore the distinctive nature of the HE experience at HCFHE is that the college is smaller, friendlier, has supportive helpful lecturers, feels personal because of the small classes, helps with developing academic confidence because of the same reason, is familial, comfortable and relaxed. Indeed a number of students commented that they felt the environment was relaxed, namely by the flexible routes it offered, which some students felt wouldn’t be available at a university.

On the converse however, some learners expressed the view that University had distinct advantages, namely in that it offered a wider range of course choices and flexibility in terms of offering a range of option modules. Another reason put forward was that universities had far better resources, not least in

terms of library stocks, periodical availability and longer opening hours of the libraries. For example, Maggie a 3rd Year Behavioural Studies student stated

“...university would have a lot more resources to make your life easier, i.e. more books which are limited here and can’t get into a lot of journals here...there are also a lack of computers and facilities for studying.”

Francis, a 2nd Year, BA (Hons) Learning Difficulty student felt that there were:

“not enough books to refer to...a lack of stock in the library...chasing too few books...can’t access internet for journal articles.”

Similarly, Claire, a first year PGCE student, who had previously attended a university felt that:

“universities libraries are open much longer and have a wider range of books...the books are out of date at Havering College library...feel the library is geared towards younger learners who are around during the day...”

The issue of younger learners was a criticism from a number of respondents and appeared to impact on their learning experience. Shazia, a third year student, was particularly vocal in her concerns about young learners:

“Its not really a library is it? Its just a doss house with all those kids swearing, its just crazy.”

Peter, a Youth and Community student whilst not critical of the young learners, citing it as a positive part of the college environment, felt that the young learners did create a disturbing level of noise in both the library and the canteen, although he recognised that university might equally be full of noisy 18 year olds.

Another difference between the experience of attending Havering College and a university concerned the issue of status, i.e. that a university degree would confer more status and perhaps make a difference to employers. A rather confused discourse emerged that on one level there was an awareness that a course at Havering College and a similar course at a university were equal yet one had more status. For example, Carol suggested that “one institution was as good as another” whereas for Sarah, she articulated that there was no great difference between Havering College and a university but then went on later to say that she felt that outside Havering and London, employers may make judgments about the qualification gained because of its perceived lower status.

The issue of status was expressed by other learners who felt that their course had status only by virtue of the connection to Greenwich University. Steve, a Mechanical engineering student felt that Havering College was a “stepping

stone” to university and Simon, a Music Production/Performance student felt that:

“...supposed to be better tutors at university aren’t they? They are the next level up, more qualifications I presume.”

However this was not the view of all students, some of whom expressed the view that there were no differences in status. Two other themes emerged, that of learners’ perceptions that universities had larger staff teams and that one may have an enhanced “adult learning experience” at a university. For example, Michael felt that some lecturers and security staff, treated him like a “teenager” on the basis that staff were “too used to having younger kids around”. Danielle raised similar concerns about feeling that she was not treated like an adult. This related to the construction of a new building at the college, which she claims, will require in future, for staff to be present with students.

Lastly, in terms of students attending universities in the future, a significant number of learners stated they would probably apply to a university but only on the basis that Havering College didn’t offer the particular course they wanted. There would seem to be the need therefore to capture this potential new market. A significant numbers however, wanted to continue their academic studies at Havering College, despite some criticism of the institution.

In some ways the exploration of the potential differences between a university and HCFHE and the consideration of where and what current HE learners may do in the future in way of studying raises a contradiction, in that the small class sizes and therefore smaller number of lecturers seemed to offer positives to some students and posed negatives for other students. It was also interesting to note that some students offered both perspectives and there was some recognition that small class sizes and developing good relationships with tutors would not be a feature of university life, but that came at a cost, i.e. less choice in terms of courses and modules offered, perhaps smaller staff teams and less “status”. This discussion now focuses on the “needs” of HE learners at Havering College

The Needs of HE Students

It is recognised that the term “need” can be rather nebulous and difficult to define. This is especially so given the diverse student population at Havering College, which in some ways makes generalisations potentially difficult – nonetheless understanding the needs of various “types” of learners is imperative to ensure continued recruitment and retention and to improve the student experience. This area of the research was explored in a number of ways. In the pilot questionnaire, respondents were asked what their needs were and this was often left blank or a comment put that this question was not clear. Thus in the questionnaire, the question was asked in a more closed way with a range of possibilities to tick, including the term “other”. Interviewees were also asked this question and in some ways the two

research instruments produced quite different results – nonetheless conclusions can still be drawn.

The questionnaire revealed that most learners expressed a need for support and help with essays, closely linked to that were needs around developing academic writing and developing academic confidence. Support around referencing appropriately also emerged as a dominant theme. What also emerged from the questionnaire findings was support around balancing work, life and studies – and indeed balancing these things often caused students some distress and anxiety and whilst lecturers can not minimise these pressures for students – understanding the pressures and strains on students is vitally important. Indeed, Simon, a Music Production/Performance student, felt that the lecturers were only familiar with the needs of younger students, living at home with their parents, and did not understand the pressures in his life, i.e. the need to work and his responsibilities as a parent. Overall Simon did not feel supported by the lecturers and felt he was labelled as not fully committed to the course. He stated:

“tutors can be narcissistic...sort of single minded about things, I’ve explained to them the situation a few times...sometimes you say something and they’ve already got an answer ready for you and they go off on one and you can’t get a word in, because they’re a tutor, they have sort of got this higher place.”

Simon expressed the need for the course to meet his needs around parental responsibilities; i.e. the need to start lectures later and the need to be treated as an adult.

Support around coping with the demands of the course also emerged and it can be seen as very similar to balancing . There may be a range of practical things tutors can do to support students around coping with the demands of a course of study, firstly by responding appropriately to students' emotional needs. There needs to be some recognition that coming back into education can cause anxiety and loss. Indeed social work students, currently working in the field as assistant social workers, often go through a process of professional and personal de-construction when learning new skills and knowledge, especially knowledge that challenges their previous selves. Given that the vast majority of courses are vocational in nature and attract older learners, this process of deconstruction and the associated loss of identity seems a possibility for a significant number of students.

Less prominent in learners' responses, although still important was the need for support in using the library, study skills sessions, returning to study after a break and developing skills in IT. The interviews provided an opportunity to consider this issue of "need" in further depth. This was explored by asking learners to consider what their needs were, recognising of course that it may be hard for any learners to be able to articulate how they learn best or what they "need" from an educational establishment.

The interviews revealed two major themes, one of the need for staff to understand the other pressures in students' lives and the issue of balancing the many demands. Peter, for example said:

“...need supportive staff, who recognise you are in a juggling game...who appreciate the difficulties of managing the demands of life.”

Other respondents articulated the competing demands placed on themselves. Michael for example, spoke of feeling “overwhelmed” and Rebecca asked:

“...how are you meant to fit it in? There are not enough hours in the day to do it”.

Linked to this was some criticism about the course structure, including the timing of the days, or assignment timetables, which for some learners, were all concentrated in one period. The other major themes that was revealed by the interview was that of supporting students to develop their academic confidence alongside the need for individual tutorial support, with constructive feedback (verbal and written) on assignments.

Michael spoke of “his own personal pride” in being able to ask for further clarification of a particular issue in class and Peter spoke in terms of lecturers as being a motivational force in helping him feel confident about his academic work. Paul also commented on his growing academic confidence, achieved

he felt, with the support of his tutor and the general friendly environment of the college.

Other needs included flexibility, learning outcomes to be written in a more accessible way, disability support and one to one tutorial support. Needs around challenging racism was also identified by two respondents.

It can be seen that a lot of “need” expressed by all the research respondents relate specifically to academic needs, i.e. study skills, support with essay writing, referencing, feedback on assignments and others more related to supporting students with the many demands they faced. It can be seen that the leap to an HE course for any learners will be a difficult one, but for learners who have less in the way of academic qualifications, this becomes ever more pertinent. Thus the previous educational experiences of learners are important to consider.

The interview respondents were thus asked to comment on their previous educational experiences. For 13 out of 22 respondents, their accounts of schooling were negative or indifferent. There was a sense of not having met one’s potential, not seeing the relevance of education or of failing. For example, Carol said:

“I knew school was relevant...I knew that qualifications would help, I just didn’t like the structure and formality.”

Paul spoke of:

“never feeling comfortable at school...never felt I got much self-esteem from it and generally my experience of education are negative.”

And Carol said:

“I always had it in the back of my mind that I could have done better at school.”

Michael, who by attending a HE education course had discovered that he had dyslexia spoke of his negative school experiences. He stated

“Back then and at that time, I thought, I am thick, I can’t do this, I am stupid...”

Several students spoke of parental pressure not to attend school, or parent attitudes prevailed that did not value education. For example, Shazia spoke about her Father not encouraging her at school, preferring her to work in the family restaurant from the age of 13. She commented:

“[I] don’t remember much of school, I did actually want to go to college but Father wouldn’t, you know, wouldn’t agree for me to go.”

Similarly, Carol, spoke of her Father as being a “traditional north-east man” who felt that it was not important for a girl to do well at school although she felt her brother had been pushed and labelled as “clever”. Carol also spoke of the perception that her parents and the school had low expectations of her academic abilities.

Peter, felt too, that his parents were not openly supportive of education and valued paid work instead. He commented that he felt his parents had “a fear of education; of getting above your station”. Peter spoke of two worlds, his family/parental world and that of academia and that there may be conflicting values between the two. Indeed he spoke of education as having the potential to:

“put you against your family, take you out of your parents world and into another world.”

This also applied to younger learners; for example, Martin, a 20 year old Computing student, despite having done well at GCSEs was encouraged by his sister to get a job, as further education would be “a waste of time”. Other students spoke of being “rebels” at school or a “yobette”. It is important to recognise that whilst not all interviewees expressed negative discourses around their schooling, a potentially significant proportion of HE learners at HCFHE will have had negative experiences, been labelled as a failure, had a dyslexia diagnosis missed, have been brought up in environments where

education is not valued or is seen as being for other people, and therefore will be confronting these issues.

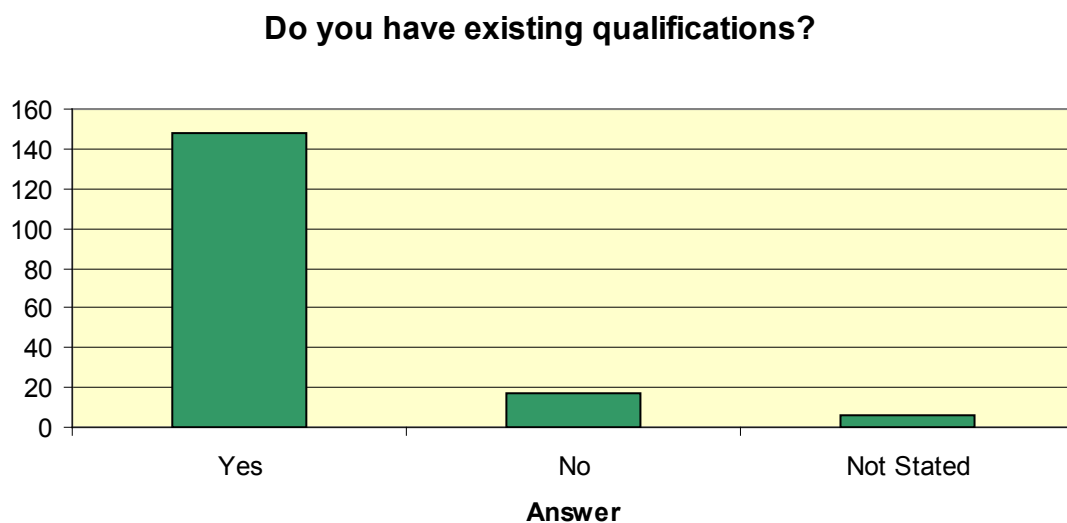
Another important issues concerning the potential needs of HE learners at HCFHE concerns the issue of being “a first generation HE learner”. With the exception of one respondent, all learners interviewed stated that they were the first generation of HE learner in their immediate families, with 4 of those having siblings who had previously attended a university. This suggests that HE learners may not have the “cultural capital” that other learners may have. Directly related to this therefore concerns a brief consideration of HE learners previous educational attainments.

Previous Educational Attainments

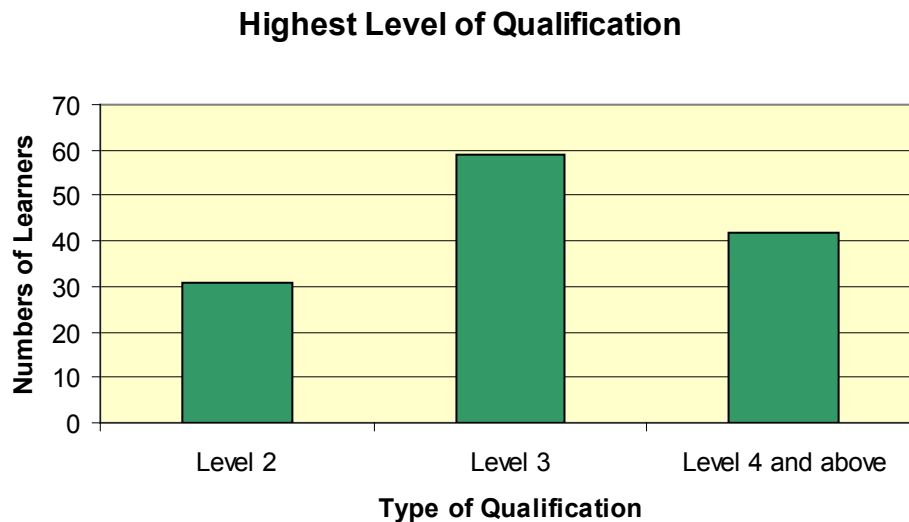
Learners were asked in both research processes what other qualifications they had. Out of those interviewed one learner had no qualifications, the majority, twelve, had a mixture of CSEs, O Levels, GCSEs qualifications as their highest level of achievement to date. Five had the equivalent of Level 3 qualifications; ie A levels, BTECs, GNVQs etc. Two learners had been on an access course and two had prior experience of Level 4 course; i.e. degrees, diplomas. Thus the majority, over 50% had level 2 qualifications although most learners had a “few” of these qualifications, although for some younger learners, they had rather more in way of GCSEs. This may imply that there will need to be an understanding that the leap between level 2, coupled with

negative experiences at school, to higher education will be significant and learners will be on a steep, if not vertical, learning curve.

The questionnaire revealed similar findings in that the majority of respondents (i.e., 86%) had previous qualifications as seen below.



However, the results were rather different from the interviews in terms of the level of previous qualifications. Of those learners who had previous qualifications and who stated what their qualifications were, the most numerous type of qualification revealed was Level 3 qualifications and is revealed by the following chart:

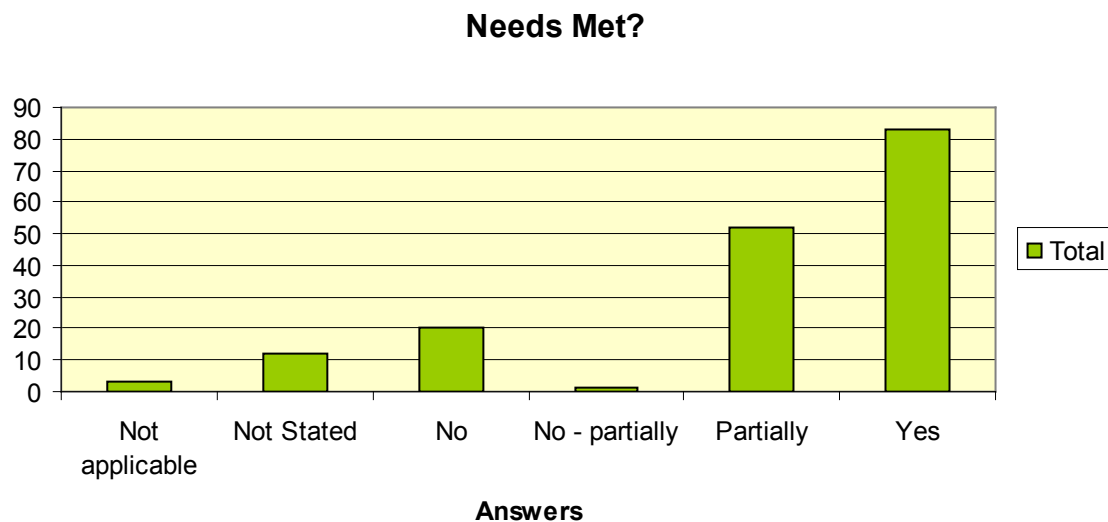


The level 3 qualifications however often took the form of non A'level qualifications; i.e. BTEC, GNVQs and AVCEs. The level 4 qualifications took the form of HNCs and HNDs and accounted for students working through these levels of qualifications at the college. They also took the form of degrees and, in four instances, masters and postgraduate diplomas (most of these were, not surprisingly, held by students on the PGCE course although some were also found from social work students).

Whilst conclusions can be difficult from these mixed research findings, what can be seen is that for some learners, there will be a need for more academic support than others as the leap will be greater. Nonetheless, developing students' academic skills and confidence will be a requirement for most students. This also reveals the diversity of the students that attend HCFHE. The report now details in what ways learners' needs have or haven't been met.

Is HCFHE meeting the needs of its HE Learners?

Learners who completed the questionnaire were asked whether their needs were being met, if they felt there were not, or only partially met, they were asked to comment further. Overall on the question of whether learners' needs were met, the following was revealed:



Overall, it appeared that the majority of learners felt their needs had been met. Reasons given for the partial and no response included:

- Lack of support from college staff (in particular, not enough support with essays, assignments, guidance on assessment tasks, help with developing academic confidence, lack of support for older learners.
- Lack of learning support and support around dyslexia
- More understanding from staff about pressures and demands faced by students in their personal lives.
- More detailed feedback on essays.
- Lesson contents on blackboard.

- Clear course aims and details of assignments.
- Lessons not always matched to assessment tasks.
- More books and other library resources.
- Quiet study area.
- Lack of provision for religious needs.
- Unhelpful tutor, not helpful staff and ineffective teaching.

Results from the interviews revealed that students' needs were not being met in respect of the course organisation and of not being allocated a personal tutor. Several respondents spoke of not having received any written feedback on their assignments. For example, Maggie, a 3rd year student, Behavioural Studies learner stated that she had "never had a tutorial since I have been here" and stated the need for consistent feedback. She commented further that she had received no written feedback in the first year of her course, only the grades and that support came from other students. Emma, a business student also spoke of the need for feedback on essays, she states:

"have been told I have passed, but no written feedback, there's no feedback on what you could have done to get a better pass...I need help, I have been out of education for 7 years, I need a bit more guidance, my job doesn't really require writing so I need support, there is no recognition that I have been out of education for a long time."

Claire, a PGCE student, whom one could assume had a very good level of academic skills and abilities by virtue of being a graduate also spoke of the need for feedback. She states:

“I need more feedback on assignments – not clear whether just scrapped essays or got a good pass, need clearer feedback.”

Other issues emerged concerned having to chase tutors for details of a forthcoming exam, tutors not responding to phone calls or emails and timetables only being available a few days before the course began. One respondent spoke of her need to have learning outcomes written in an accessible way and for there to be a way of devising handing in times which was more balanced throughout the year rather than the handing-in for all modules being concentrated in one week.

A range of students also spoke about the need for more organisation on their respective courses. The perceived lack of organisation arose from the lack of feedback on assignments and grades being published late. Several learners spoke of their frustration when teaching sessions were cancelled due to staff sickness, lack of cover being provided for such sessions and often the late cancellations of sessions or not being informed. Maggie for example, spoke of a lecturer being off on long term sick and no cover was put in place and this was a similar concern voiced by Martin, who felt a whole unit had been “lost” because of cover not being found soon enough.

Michael felt the lack of organisation revealed itself by sessional lecturers often arriving late and the lessons themselves appearing ill prepared. Other comments regarding organisation of the respective courses, focusing around the late preparation of timetables, handbooks arriving late, if at all, tutors “changing their minds” about assessment guidelines and lack of consistency between tutors in terms of assessment guidelines. It would seem imperative therefore, that if learners perceive a particular course as disorganised then the learners may well lose confidence in the course management and the institution itself. It also impacts on learners’ enjoyment of the programme and possibility progression rates. Indeed a concern was raised about fellow learners who had “dropped out” and various reasons for postulated for what was felt to be a high drop out rate.

Maggie, who had ended up on the course rather by accident, i.e. she had intended to enrol for Sociology and Psychology A’levels and had been “persuaded” to enrol on a degree programme, felt that she had been misled about the relevance and appropriateness of her existing qualifications as being adequate preparation for the degree programme. She felt that the leap from GCSE to a degree had been “difficult” and a “huge academic leap”. Thus an issue about appropriate recruitment is raised and this may be a reason for non-progression for some learners, especially if their needs around study skills are also not being met.

This issue was also raised by Peter, who felt concerned about the recruitment process as students had left the course. He felt that tutors should be able to

reject people onto the course and students should be “at the right level” before entering. For Peter, the perception that “anyone is let on” made him feel de-valued as a learner and undervalued in terms of his practical experience in Youth Work. He thus raised concerns about the feeling that student numbers on a particular course were more important than accepting the most appropriate students. This was also raised by Maggie, who felt that:

“people like, who do this course, should have some sort of background, even if they have to sit some exam or some sort of test....too many people drop out because they can’t cope and it leaves people feeling like shit quite frankly.”

Martin, also, commented on the numbers of students who had left the programme whom he perceived to be about a quarter of the original intake. He felt this was because of one module having no teacher, and the impact of noisy and disruptive students in the class. It would seem imperative therefore, that the college must ascertain the reasons why students do not complete a course and consideration of what are the minimum academic requirements for entering a programme in order to ensure success outcomes. This would seem difficult given the non-traditional status of the learners but a balance perhaps, needs to be found.

Disability

On the questionnaire students were asked whether they had a disability. It was interesting to note that no-one identified themselves as having a disability

and yet comments were later included that suggested learners may have needs around disability issues. One student commented that because of his hearing loss, he struggled to hear lecturers over the noise created by the computer and projector. Another learner wrote that her needs were not being met around her dyslexia in that she required:

“as assessment with dyslexia, which I wanted to have but was dragged to such a long process and had to give up and fund myself – support not helpful at all.”.

Indeed support for mature learners with disabilities can be problematic in that, younger learners may well have had a relevant assessment in their school and can easily apply for a Disabled Student Grant. For learners who have not had a formal disability assessment, most often a dyslexia assessment, they are often required to fund the initial assessment themselves before local authority support is forthcoming. This process can be lengthy and students are often in a “catch 22 situation” that they need to be in education to get support but they need the support in order to progress on the course. Thus they are often disadvantaged by the lengthy progress which can significant impact on achievement and perpetuate lack of confidence and self-belief.

The bureaucratic process is frustrating enough, however tutors also need to have an awareness of the support needs around various disabilities. Michael, a Health and Social Care student commented that only one lecturer in the college seemed to understand his needs around dyslexia and would highlight

his work in green. He felt that support and understanding of his condition was not forthcoming from other lecturers and stated:

“I had one lecturer turn round to me and say, well I don’t know anything about dyslexia so can’t really help you there.”

Given that many of the HE learners can be considered non-traditional and may have had negative experiences of school or have failed at school, it may be that there a higher than average proportion of HCFHE students may have unknown learning difficulties. Overall this is an important area that requires further research – not least in how many HE learners currently identify their selves as having disabilities.

Ethnicity

As aforementioned, the issue of racism emerged from the interview process. Two students, Francis, a mature student of Black-African origin and Surrinder, who defines herself as British Asian, spoke of being subject to racism by a tutor. Francis, spoke of a tutor having spoke to him disrespectfully and:

“...used words you would use to pets and dogs. These words have affected me.”

Surrinder also commented on racist attitudes prevalent amongst fellow students that were not challenged appropriately. This impacted on her adversely to the point where:

“I hate coming...I was even suffering anxiety, the night before, oh I am going to be in that group, nobody will talk to me, they say things like Hitler being a wonderful man and people are coloured... they are coming out with pretty horrendous stuff.”

Francis felt the lecturers lacked experience and “depth of understanding” in teaching students from different backgrounds and in particular, students from African backgrounds. He felt that White British students were given more help and support. In particular he made an indirect reference to the needs of some students who had had to flee their countries of origin because of political issues. He said:

“some of us have scars from our past and we see the same things happening and we get more affected.”

These accounts of racism and a lack of cultural awareness is a matter of concern and raises issues about the potential negative and damaging experiences faced by black and ethnic minority learners in a college with a predominantly White British student and staff population. Indeed, Savita raised an issue about being the “only Asian in the class” and that she felt “on her own”. She also felt that the teaching groups had become polarised, with “cliques” being formed on the basis of country of origin. She suggested more group tutorials as a way of overcoming this tendency. The report now goes on to consider what are the expectations of HE learners in HCFHE and how far these expectations have been met.

Expectations

The questionnaire asked a number of questions to help explore the notion of expectations and how far they have been met. These were:

- What did you imagine studying a course at HCFHE was going to be like?
- What have been the best things about doing a higher education course at HCFHE?
- What have been the worst things about doing a Higher Education Course at HCFHE

The interview respondents were also asked about their expectations and ways the college could improve their HE experience. The most numerous response was that of “hard work”, learners it seems, on the whole knew it was going to be hard work undertaking an HE course although some underestimated just how hard it would be. Similarly a few respondents stated they thought it was going to be easy and realised very quickly on that it was not. Only 2 respondents felt it was easier than they had anticipated. The phrases, demanding, difficult and challenging also arose in terms of learners expectations about the course. Another theme that emerged was of learning new knowledge, skills etc and terms like “inspiring” were used. There was an expectations that staff would be friendly, supportive and approachable and that the general atmosphere of the college was “laid back, casual and relaxed”. Other learners expressed the expectation that learning would be both fun and enjoyable and there would be an opportunity to meet new

people. Fewer learners appeared to anticipate the potential difficulties in balancing work, life and study.

For a significant number of learners, both the questionnaire and the interviews revealed that learners didn't have any prior expectations although they were still able to comment on what they perceived as deficiencies on the particular programme of study. For example, Claire stated that whilst she didn't really have any expectations on the course begin with – she now feels that more organisation was required. Danny expressed similar views about his initial expectations:

“I didn't have any expectations, signed onto the course and that was it, didn't think it would be like this, like that, just got on with it.”

Many learners revealed in their responses on the questionnaire, although not specifically asked, that their expectations had been met and this was also found in the interview process. Rebecca for example, stated that her expectations had been fully realised as did Ben and Francis.

The best things about doing an HE course?

The questionnaire revealed that the biggest theme concerned the staff who the students found helpful, supportive, encouraging and committed. Indeed a BA (hons) Graphic Design student wrote:

“staff are always there to help students, for guidelines with work and any personal problems. I think our college cares about staff and students, this makes a big difference as I have friends that really don't like going to college because of their relationships with their lecturers.”

Similarly a Youth and Community student wrote:

“I have found the tutorials and support to be fantastic, in fact much better than my previous experience of Higher Education.”

Another theme that emerged about learners' perceptions of the positive aspects of the course concerned learning new knowledge, gaining academic confidence and broadening their knowledge of particular subjects as well as gaining new skills. In particular students also enjoyed learning from one another and enjoyed meeting new people from a wider range of backgrounds. Other themes emerged included the locality of the college; i.e. it was local and the general atmosphere of the college was which was felt to be friendly. The report now examines what expectations have not been met and considers what have been the more negative experiences for HE learners.

What expectations haven't been realised?

One of the most numerous responses to this question, concern course organisation, in that despite expectations of organised, well managed courses, this has not been the experience for a significant number of learners across a range of curriculum areas. There would seem scope therefore for some further research in this area but this requires addressing by HCFHE. For some learners the course has been more difficult than anticipated and for a few easier than anticipated. The tutorial support expected by some learners has also not materialised, although other learners spoke of the high level of tutorial support and good relationships with staff.

Other respondents were less positive. Maggie for example, described her experience as a HE learner as one of being “mis-sold” in that, at the beginning of the course, she alleged that the students had been informed their course was recognised by the British Psychological Society (BPS) ⁹ and it later transpired that the course was not BPS validated. She states:

“This degree doesn’t qualify you for anything, it is not recognised, not BPS recognised, can’t work as a psychologist so what can you do? I will need to now do a conversion course, we were told it was going to be a recognised BPS course.”

Likewise Surrinder spoke of:

⁹ If a course is BPS recognised, this means that graduates can become psychologists.

“promises [being] made that were not kept, course leader has turned nasty, now seems to have changed his mind about attendance requirements. I feel really disappointed...”

What expectations were unrealistic or perhaps unanticipated?

Despite hard work being anticipated by a large number of HE learners, it seems that learners cannot really appreciate the amount of work involved until they are well established in their particular course of study. For example, Peter reported:

“...it is much harder work that I thought it was going to be, may be due to my naivety, kind of thought it would be easier, education is hard going, coupled with all life things going on.”

Michael reported that he often felt, “overwhelmed” and questioned why he was doing the course. Maggie reported:

“They made it sound like this, big great thing, that was going to be easy and it's not easy, not that a degree is meant to be easy but if you've not really looked into one and it's going to be this big marvellous thing and yeah it's good, but it's a case of it's good because I've made it that way, not down to lecturers and college.”

The issue of time also emerged, Sarah stated:

“I came into it for a challenge, its been less of a challenge so far, less than I thought it would be but more a challenge time wise, If I knew the time challenges may not have taken it on.”

Sheila too, whilst finding the content of the course easier than she had anticipated, found the demands on her time difficult and had not anticipated this.

For Savita, she had anticipated the students being a similar age to herself, although most of the learners on her course were older. She had also anticipated the experience as being “more college-y”, i.e. less academic than it was.

The worst things about doing an HE course?

A very wide variety of responses were received in relation to this issues, ranging from having to move buildings three quarters of the way through the course to the studios feeling cold in winter. The dominant themes that emerged however, overwhelmingly concerned poor organisation, lack of appropriate structure to the courses, poor teaching, disorganisation, ill prepared and inconsistent teaching sessions and unrealistic deadlines for assignments. Within this category issues such as not having course handbooks and study guidelines in a timely fashion, inconsistency of essay

marking and essay guidance and lack of tutorials also arose. For example, a Foundation Degree in Mechanical Engineering learner wrote:

***“teachers not turning up on time or not turning up at all.
Teachers not having prepared a lesson plan, teachers who don’t
really know the subject...”***

The second main theme that emerged in response to his question concerned the difficulties of balancing work, life and study and for many students the stress caused had been one of the worst things about studying a HE course at HCFHE. For example one Youth and Community student wrote that the worst thing was “fitting the studying around a full time job and home life.” Another Youth and Community student wrote “juggling home and study.” On a more positive note, a reasonable number of students wrote that there was nothing. Lastly students were asked in both the questionnaire and the interviews what could be done differently at HCFHE.

What could HCFHE do differently?

Again, a range of responses were received in relation to this question. The most stated area for improvement was that of general increasing the facilities for HE students within the college. This included better library facilities, including internet access to on-line journals and more quiet study spaces with greater computing facilities. It also included dedicated HE spaces within the college; i.e. a common room, in order to mix with other HE students, prepare

groups work and to have quiet space away from the noise of the refectory and library. The other area for improvement concerned the organisation and structure of the various programmes, which was perceived as poor. For example, a BSc in Learning Difficulties student wrote:

“consistency of lectures, stop changing the course half way through, lecturers not knowing what other lecturers are doing, i.e. confusion of handing in course work dates, sorting out my own exam arrangements - the list is endless!”

The area of better organisation also included the timing of the modules and assignment deadlines, the need for strict, clear deadlines for assignments with a clear and transparent mitigation process. Another clear area for improvement concerned the students teaching and learning experience. The learners expressed a need for consistent staffing; i.e. one tutor to teach one module, consistency between tutors in terms of assignment guidelines and teaching, improved communication between staff and students, a need for tutors to understand course requirements, more support with essays and clear descriptions of modules and their requirements at the beginning of the course. Two other concerns included the need for teaching rooms to be cooler and better ventilated and improvements to be made in the canteen; i.e. the food was seen as expensive, unappetising and unhealthy. Whilst this section appears to end on a more negative note, it can be seen that for some learners the experience at HCFHE has been very positive and for others, less so.

Overall this chapter has examined HE learners' motivations and reasons for attending the college and for pursuing an HE course. It has also offered a consideration of what some of the needs of a very diverse range of learners may be and also considered how far learners perceived their needs to have been met. It lastly deals with the issues of expectations and considered how far HCFHE meets the expectations of its HE learners. It can be seen where the experience of HE learners both is similar and differs from the existing research findings.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings and process of research, the following recommendations have been drawn.

1) HCFHE already has extensive data collection systems that provide each curriculum area with detailed information regarding the learners, in terms of age, ethnicity, disability and sex. This data should be used in a number of ways, firstly to target marketing more appropriately and indeed market in a way that largely meets the needs of non-traditional learners.

2) A significant number of HE learners have already attended HCFHE on a range of FE courses, suggesting that progression routes are having the desired effect. This would suggest increasing the number of progression routes into curriculum areas where currently there are none.

3) Whilst the label “non-traditional” student can be potentially pathologising, it needs to be explicitly recognised that HCFHE is successful in attracting, local, non-traditional, often 1st generation HE learners into the college and this requires offering study skills modules, guiding students through the often impenetrable world of academia, detailed written feedback on assignments, one to one tutorial support and an understanding of the needs of mature students who have financial commitments and often have dependent children. An understanding is also required that entering an HE environment

can cause anxiety, fear and a loss of identity, as well as offer many positive outcomes.

4) A significant number of learners live locally to the college, thus concentrating marketing locally, in a way that meets the needs of people who have little knowledge or experience of HE systems is indicated.

5) The importance of word of mouth in attracting HE learners cannot be underestimated and, therefore, students whose experience of Havering College is less than positive, could deter potential new learners. Thus, ensuring complaints and concerns are dealt with remains vitally important.

6) An issue that arose across all curriculum areas, was the perception by learners of poor course organisation in a number of areas, including: unclear assessment regulations or regulations that changed during the course; the need for course handbooks to be given out in a timely manner; staff absences not being covered or lectures cancelled at short notice; poor timing of modules and assessments; and poor and inconsistent teaching. It seems imperative that concerns about poor organisation require further research and continued monitoring.

7) Flexible routes appear to meet the needs of more mature learners who have financial and familial commitments. An expectation from the college that progression may be non-linear and may include the need for deferral and re-sits of modules as the norm is indicated.

8) Balanced against the above recommendation, however, is the acknowledgement that a significant percentage of HE learners are non-mature students and thus traditional full time programmes should still be a feature of the college's output. Given the introduction of top-up fees, younger students may not have the option of attending a university away from home, due to the increased costs. This seems a likely emerging market.

8) The importance of employer sponsorship of learners on day release HE programmes, especially Foundation Degree programmes, remains crucial and should be further developed.

9) There needs to be established links between a particular course of study and an improvement in employment outcomes – monitoring of post-course employment outcomes may therefore be indicated.

10) A major dissatisfaction amongst current HE learners was the lack of dedicated space available for them, in terms of quiet, study space and space to plan group work, etc. Whilst it is acknowledged that meeting the needs of all learners in an FEC remains challenging, the need for quiet, dedicated space seems crucial in improving the HE experience.

11) Whilst many HE students praised the library staff, concerns were raised about lack of books, periodicals and other library resources. Thus the issue of library stocks and resources requires further consideration.

12) There would seem to be a need to balance the preferences of the students, in terms of the need for and enjoyment in attending smaller classes with the college's need to increase HE provision. Thus the small number on some course is both strength and a potential weakness. This also implies that lectures in HE courses need to be generalists in their subject area rather than have narrow specialisms.

13) Overall, there seems scope to develop a more consistent, stronger, institutional HE ethos that permeates all curriculum areas, with a parallel development in terms of minimum quality standards.

Conclusions

Overall the report documents qualitative research undertaken between January 2006 to June 2006. It attempted to consider the motivations of He learners in pursuing an HE programme at HCFHE, the needs of such students and the expectations of such students. In examining these areas, the research also aimed to consider how far the college was successful in meeting these needs and expectations. Almost by accident, the research has considered what the distinctiveness of the He experience is at HCFHE and this should be promoted. The picture revealed both positives and negatives and whilst it would be unrealistic to expect an HEI to meet every student's needs and expectations and for there to be no complaints, it seemed that there are certain curriculum areas and working practices that require improvement and development. Where students praise working practices, these also require rolling out across the college. It can be argued that there is a need for HCFHE and its staff to develop an HE ethos and develop standards of consistent practice that focus on improving the experience for learners. The ethos should include a full understanding of the diverse student population and a consideration of the needs that such diversity brings as well as ensuring those needs are met. Consistency between lecturers and across curriculum areas also seems highly indicated as well as improvements in teaching practice. Developing supportive relationships with students is also crucial for HCFHE staff to ensure progression and achievement on programmes.

As stated at the start of this college, there is a danger of pathologising and labelling students thus there needs to be a balance between meeting the individual needs of students but having some understanding of what learners needs may be – this is especially so given a significant percentage of HE learners are younger and may be a growing number although currently the vast majority of learners are mature.

There seems scope for continued HE development at HCFHE, despite some current threats, both internal and external and HCFHE will be required to respond to the issues raised by external policy developments and this research. It may be argued that HE expansion has developed too quickly, without the necessary infrastructure and capacity being developed amongst the staff and college and there seems an overwhelming need to develop good practice guidance and a clear standards in terms of HE provision. Thus HE development should be driven by quality rather than quantity and range of courses.

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Appendices

Interview Schedule

1. How do you identify yourself, i.e. male, working class, ethnicity, first generation to study at HE? etc.
2. Where do you live? (i.e. rough area)
3. How did you come to study at Havering College? (previous experience of education, choice or not, etc, progression route, did you apply to a university etc, why doing the course at this point)
4. What difficulties, if any, have you encountered on the course to date?
5. Do you think Havering College offers you something a university doesn't?
6. Do you think a university may offer you something that Havering College, currently doesn't?
7. What do you think your needs are as a learner and are they currently being met?
8. What could Havering College do differently to meet your needs?
9. What could Havering College do to and improve your overall experience?
10. Are you interested in further study?
11. If you had the choice, would you like to stay at Havering College or go elsewhere?

12. Any other issues/things you'd like to comment on about your experience at Havering College?
13. Have your expectations been met?



PILOT QUESTIONNAIRE

The Needs and Expectations of HE Learners in an FE Environment

Information:

This research has been commissioned by Havering College to look more closely at current Higher Education (HE) provision in the college from the perspective of learners. This research ties in with wider policy developments and initiatives concerning the future of HE provision in Further Education (FE) colleges. The research is being undertaken by a member of staff (Jo Finch, Lecturer in Social Work). **The form is confidential and you are not required to put your name.** Please be as honest as possible and elaborate fully on the questions.

This is the first phase of the research. The second phase will be to interview a selection of learners to discuss the issues in further depth. If you would like to be interviewed (this will be fully confidential) please leave details of your first name and a contact telephone number and/or email address at the end of the questionnaire:

Age: _____ Ethnicity: _____ Sex: M F
(please circle)

Do you have a disability: Yes No (please circle)

Name _____ of _____
Course: _____

Qualification you are currently studying towards: (i.e. BA, HND,

BSc)_____ Route: Full or Part Time or Distance?
(Please circle)

Year of Course: (i.e. 1st,2nd):_____

Do you have any other qualifications? Yes No (please
circle)

If _____ yes, _____ please
list_____

1) Have you studied at Havering College before? Yes No
(please circle)

If yes, what course(s) and year(s)

2) Please state the reasons why you have chosen to study an HE course at
this particular
time.

3) Did you make a choice to study at Havering College? Yes No
(please circle)

If no, why not? (Please elaborate) If yes, why did you choose Havering College to do your course? (Please list as many reasons as possible).

4) What needs to you have think you have as an HE learner at Havering College? (Please list as many as possible)

Have they been met? Yes No Partially (please circle as appropriate)

If yes, in what ways? If no, what needs haven't been met? (Please elaborate)

5) What were your expectations about studying at Havering College?

Have they been met? Yes No Partially (Please circle as appropriate)

(Please elaborate further – what expectations did you have? What have or haven't been met?)

6) What have been the best things about doing a Higher Education course at Havering College? (please elaborate as fully as possible)

7) What have been the worst things about doing a Higher Education Course at Havering College?

8) Do you wish you had gone to another institution to study your course?

Yes No Possibly (please circle as appropriate)

Why? (please elaborate)

9) What do you think the differences might be between studying at a university and studying at Havering College?

10) What suggestions do you have for improving your experience at the college?

10) When you finish your course, do you intend to study for further qualifications?

Yes
(appropriate)

No

Don't know yet (please circle as appropriate)

Which qualification/course: _____

Why?

11) If you want to continue studying after finishing your course here, would you like to stay at Havering College or attend another university?

Stay at Havering College
(please circle)

Another University

Don't Know

Why?

12) Would you be prepared to be interviewed ? Yes No

First Name: _____ Telephone No: _____

Email address: _____

Thank you very much for completing the questionnaire – your input is greatly valued by the college.

Jo Finch

This is a pilot questionnaire – do you have any comments about the questions asked, layout and design, questions you would liked to be asked, or anything else? Your feedback will be greatly appreciated.



“The Needs and Expectations of Higher Education Learners in a Further Education College”

Information:

This research has been commissioned by Havering College to look more closely at current Higher Education (HE) provision in the college from the perspective of learners. This research ties in with wider policy developments and initiatives concerning the future of HE provision in Further Education (FE) colleges. The research is being undertaken by a member of staff (Jo Finch, Lecturer in Social Work). **The form is confidential and you are not required to put your name on it.** Please be as honest as possible and elaborate fully on the questions.

This is the first phase of the research. The second phase will be to interview a selection of learners to discuss the issues in more depth. If you would like to be interviewed (this will be fully confidential) please leave details of your first name and a contact telephone number and/or email address at the end of the questionnaire.

1) Personal Information:

Age: _____

Ethnicity: _____

Sex: M F (please circle)

Do you have a disability: Yes No (please circle)

Name of Course and Qualification: _____

Route: Full or Part Time or Distance? (Please circle)

Year of Course: (i.e. 1st, 2nd): _____

Do you have any other qualifications? Yes No (please circle)

If yes, please list:

2) Have you studied at Havering College before? Yes No
(please circle)

If yes, what course(s) and year(s)

3) Why did you choose to study an HE course at Havering College at this particular time.

4) What did you imagine studying an HE course at Havering College was going to be like?

5) What “needs” do you think you have as an HE learner at Havering College?
(They might include some of the following, please tick those that apply)

Learning Support	Support with essays
Developing academic writing	Returning to study after a break
Referencing	English as a second language
Coping with demands of study	Balancing study/family/work
Using the library	Using IT
Study Skills	Developing academic
confidence	Disability
Cultural/Religious	
Social	

Other: _____

6) Have your “needs” been met? Yes No Partially (please circle as appropriate)

If no, what needs haven’t been met?

7) What have been the best things about doing a Higher Education course at Havering College? (Please elaborate as fully as possible)

8) What have been the worst things about doing a Higher Education Course at Havering College?

9) What suggestions do you have for improving your experience at the college?

10) When you finish your course, do you intend to study for further qualifications?

Yes
(please circle as appropriate)

No

Don't know yet (please circle as appropriate)

Which qualification/course: _____

Why?

11) If you want to continue studying after finishing your course here, would you like to stay at Havering College or attend a university?

Stay at Havering College
(please circle)

University

Don't Know

Why?

12) Would you be prepared to be interviewed? Yes No

First Name: _____ Telephone No: _____

Email address: _____

Thank you very much for completing the questionnaire – your views are important.

Jo Finch