Student Experience: HE in FE

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Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

Continuum was commissioned by the Association of Colleges (AoC) to undertake a focussed research project to explore the experience of learners undertaking higher education courses at further education colleges. This research commission was sponsored by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS). The findings are based on 12 focus group interviews, with over 90 learners, conducted at the seven colleges listed below:

- Hull College (2 groups)
- St. Helen's College (2 groups)
- Northampton College (2 groups)
- Westminster Kingsway College (1 group)
- City College Norwich (2 groups)
- Bradford College (1 group)
- City of Westminster College (2 groups)

The headline findings are as follows:

- The research participants' demographics in terms of ethnicity, age and gender are broadly representative of the national HE picture. However, our participants were particularly well educated with a significant minority of 26% having already had HE degree level experience.

- The main reasons given for studying HE in an FE setting were location (with localness being important), smaller class sizes, better equipment, and lower costs. This, of course excluded those who were employer sponsored where there were no other institutional options.

- The majority of participants were financing their study via student loans (44%), or were employer sponsored (31%) with only 15% self financing, and 4% on a grant or bursary.

- Participants told us that their preferred learning style was practical and they felt that the colleges delivered this.

- Induction was seen to be a problem with many telling us that they did not receive an adequate induction.

- The benefit of a small class size at college was a recurring theme – with many extolling the benefits of this in terms of more contact time with teaching staff.

- Access to teaching staff was seen to be good overall, with many praising the quick response times to their queries. However some participants said that their teachers were often unavailable to them.

- Teachers who were also practitioners were seen to be very useful in terms of accessing industry standard, and up to date information and procedures.

- Tutorial systems varied between colleges and subject areas, although all had the possibility of booking face to face tutorials. There was some confusion expressed about the nature of tutorials.

- Student perceptions of and satisfaction with the quality of teaching varied between colleges and courses.

- Access to facilities also varied between courses and colleges. While some learners were very impressed with their specialist facilities (e.g. photography) others found their facilities (particularly IT) out of date.

- IT provision was an issue, as it is in all educational institutions. The participants pointed out that while there were IT facilities provided, it was sometimes difficult to access these.

- All participants had access to a VLE although some did not use this facility much as their teachers did not update the information on the VLE regularly enough. Others found this facility very useful.

- College libraries were found to be particularly well regarded, and although many had access to the validating HEI library, very few used this facility.

- Most respondents requested an HE only area where they could study as they felt that the existing areas were too noisy.

- In terms of learner identity, there was a split of participants saying that they were studying "at uni" or "at college". The participants pointed to the fact that others might not understand that they were studying at an HE level at college.

1 Introduction

This research study was undertaken against a backdrop of public sector spending cuts; and a rapidly changing and developing policy framework for HE funding and student fees. Whilst the Coalition Government are taking forward the recommendations of the independent review by Lord Browne on higher education funding and student fees, the sector awaits the publication of the delayed Higher Education White Paper. At the present time, funding and student fees are a major issue for higher education institutions (HEIs) as they seek to make as smooth a transition as possible to the new funding settlements by 2012.

The role of FE colleges in delivering HE qualifications is an important strand of the Coalition Government's policy in the context of workforce development, raising skills levels, and social mobility – widening access to HE. Speaking at the Association of College's conference: *HE in FE: New landscape, new opportunities,* David Willetts, the Minister of State for Universities and Science, recognised the ability of FE colleges to: *"…make an ever greater contribution to education, social mobility, and to growth."* (Willetts, 2011). Commenting on the forthcoming White Paper he stated that the objective was to create the conditions for a dynamic and responsive HE sector, with fewer barriers to providers, looking afresh at the anomalies created by the distinction between "prescribed" and "non-prescribed" HE (Willetts, 2011).

Trying to offer a definition of HE in FE is no simple endeavour, since it is defined by both its source of funding, as noted by the Minster above, and level within a framework for higher qualifications. In terms of level, HE qualifications refer to programmes and courses at level 4. In terms of funding it encompasses activity funded through the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), which is termed "prescribed" higher education as well "non-prescribed" higher education which is funded through the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). Despite these difficulties in defining provision there is, as Parry and Thompson (2002) note, an established tradition of HE in FE which stretches back over 30 years.

As a number of commentators have noted, FE in general and HE in FE in particular remain relatively under-researched areas (Parry & Thompson, 2001; Weatherald & Moseley, 2003; Jones, 2006a; and Scofield, 2007). Consequently the evidence base for policy development in the late 90's and early 2000's was weak (Parry & Thompson, 2001). Later literature reviews (Jones, 2006a; Scofield, 2007; and Greenwood, 2008) reiterate this and although there is a developing and emerging literature, much of it is "grey literature" which may not have benefitted from peer review and is often difficult to access.

In the following sections we set out the methodology for the research, the findings from our fieldwork, and concluding comments. Fieldwork documents and data tables are included as appendices.

2 Methodology

In this section we set out the methodological approach adopted for the study, the rationale for the sampling strategy, data collection methods and data analysis based on the brief provided by the funder. The research team adopted a qualitative approach in order to better understand the experience of learners undertaking higher education in a further education college setting. We used semi-structured topic guides for the focus group discussions in order to ensure all relevant themes were covered, alongside allowing for more spontaneous information to emerge. The data collected from the focus groups was analysed alongside the information collected through the respondents' questionnaires. Ethical issues, informed consent and safety in the field were incorporated into the research design.

2.1 Sampling strategy

Whilst theoretical concerns may in part drive scholarly decisions, the realities of time and resources are often the key drivers in terms of sampling decisions and strategies. As Kemper, Stringfield & Teddlie (2003:273) have noted: *"Sampling issues are inherently practical."*

Research sites were selected by the funder on three criteria; firstly, the extent of their HE provision; secondly, geographical location; and thirdly, accessibility. In terms of the extent of HE provision there was a spread of colleges with low (<500), medium (500 – 1,500) and high (1,500+) number of learners studying HE in FE. In terms of location we aimed for a geographical spread with colleges in the north, east, south and west of the country. Finally, colleges were selected on the basis of accessibility – their willingness and ability to participate in the study within the fieldwork timeframe. Seven colleges were selected to participate in the study: Bradford College, City College Norwich, City of Westminster College, Hull College, Northampton College, St. Helen's College, and Westminster Kingsway College.

Two focus group meetings were held at all of the colleges except Bradford College and Westminster Kingsway College, where it was only possible to organise one focus group meeting. Respondents were recruited by the HE Manager, HE Co-ordinator or course leader at each of the colleges. Given our qualitative approach the purpose was not to recruit a random or representative sample but rather individuals for whom the research questions were salient and consequently able to contribute to the research.

2.2 Data collection - Focus group interviews

The rationale for convening focus groups is that they enable the researcher to explore the degree of consensus on a particular topic (Morgan & Kreuger, 1993) and the interaction between respondents – listening and questioning – enables them to re-evaluate their own views and experiences (Kitzinger, 1994). We wanted to find out not only what issues were salient to respondents and why (Morgan, 1988) but also understand the gap between intention and action or between what people say and what they do (Lankshear, 1993).

This method can be empowering for many respondents who are given the chance to work collaboratively with the research team, contributing to and informing the decision making process. However, we recognise that this experience may not be empowering for all respondents who may be less articulate or uncomfortable expressing their views in a peer group setting. An experienced

moderator can provide reassurance for such respondents and if appropriate consider other ways of ascertaining their views.

2.3 Data analysis

At the request of the funder we used NVivo, a computer assisted data analysis software (CAQDAS) to help manage and organise the data generated from the twelve focus group interviews. NVivo is a content analysis software package that allows users to organise complex qualitative, or unstructured data so that they can identify trends, themes, and cross examine data in a number of ways. The focus group transcriptions were coded using a "free node" system, which means that all speech acts from the transcriptions were assigned a code relating to one, or more research themes. The free node style of coding ensures that key themes emerge, as well allowing for more spontaneous information to be included. This resulted in a comprehensive thematic matrix of information. The coding was conducted by one person (to ensure consistency) and was monitored by the research team.

After the coding was completed, the data was interrogated with NVivo and a number of reports produced around key themes. These reports were then analysed. The initial coding in many instances was supplemented by text and compound queries that allow the user to drill down into the data.

2.4 Ethical considerations and informed consent

An information sheet and consent form was sent in advance to each of the colleges for distribution to the learners participating in the focus group interviews. Additional copies of the information sheet and consent form were also available at each of the focus group meetings. Learners were briefed by the focus group moderators at the beginning of each focus group meeting and were advised that their participation was voluntary; that they were entitled to refuse to answer particular questions and that they could withdraw from the interview or focus group at any time.

As Homan (1991) has noted ethical considerations for focus groups are the same as for most other methods of social research, however learners were also asked to respect the confidentiality of their fellow participants.

All participants signed the consent forms provided to confirm that they had been informed of the nature and purpose of the research, how their data would be used and reported. A copy of the information sheet and consent form is reproduced as Appendices D and E respectively.

3 Findings

In this section we set out our findings from the analysis of the data from the twelve focus groups. Apart from the first section on learners' background, we have organised our findings based on the themes: teaching and learning, infrastructure, symbolic aspects of HE identified by Weatherald & Mosley (2003) and developed by Jones (2006b) who adds a fourth theme, student engagement, as important in creating a HE ethos or culture in FE.

3.1 Learners' background

We used a simple self-completion questionnaire, a copy of which is reproduced as Appendix E, to capture basic demographic information from the learners participating in the focus group interviews. A number of learners completed the questionnaires in advance of the focus group interview, others completed them at the start of the focus group; all were handed back at the meeting.

Of the 92 learners who participated in the study there is significant variation in HE in FE learners' educational experience and previous qualifications, although some had followed the traditional "A" level route the majority did not. Of the learners who participated in the study 61% were female and 39% were male; 55% were studying full-time and 45% were studying part-time. However, from the part-time group, 14% of these were studying via "block release" and attended the college for approximately a week every month through term time. This 14% all came from the same course – clinical physiology, which made up two of the focus groups, and somewhat skews these numbers. However, this type of attendance is not that uncommon for employer sponsored HE in FE students.

The ethnic make up of the participants was captured through the questionnaire, where the largest ethnic group was white, at 84%. The next largest ethnic groups were Asian Indians (3.3%), Black Africans (3.3%) and those who did not respond (3.3%). According to HESA (2011) figures on HE UK domiciled learners of all undergraduate levels, studying at all years' (2009/10) 82% are white. While these figures do not consider HE in FE learners, the ethnic mix of the research participants is broadly in line with the national HE picture.
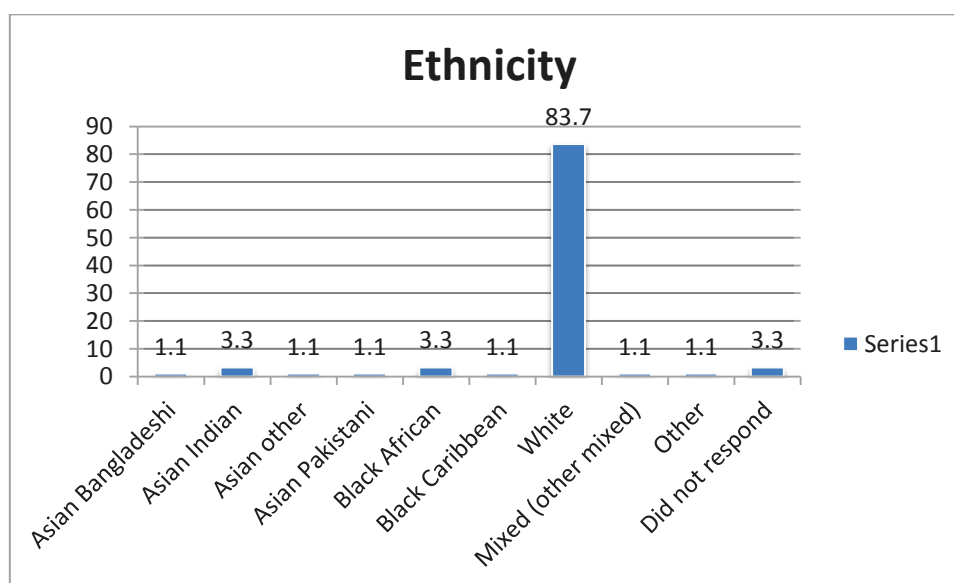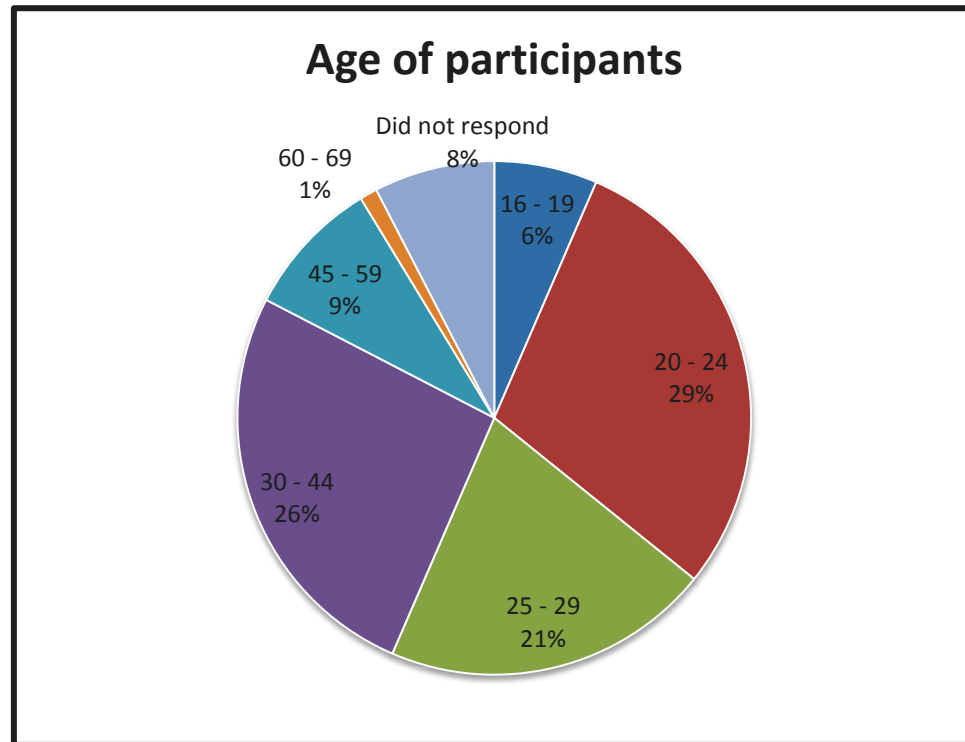

Figure 1: Respondents by ethnicity

The age of the research participants was also collected through the questionnaires. The majority of learners who participated in the research were 20 – 29, with 50% of learners in that age range. The age breakdown of participants shows a good spread, as can be seen in the following chart.

Age of participants

Figure 2: Respondents by age

Data on the previous level of education that the participants had completed was also captured via the questionnaire. As can be seen from the chart below, a significant minority had had previous HE experience (at both degree level, and foundation degree level), with 26% of participants falling into this category. This shows that our research participants were particularly well educated, with nearly 30% having previous education experiences at level 4 or 5. Due to the lack of available data for HE in FE participation and particularly demographic data here, we are unsure if this is an indicative picture of HE in FE learners, or if this is a result of selection bias. In particular, the employer sponsored learners had higher levels of previous education than those who were not sponsored by their employers. The following chart shows the highest level of previous education for all participants, where 26% have had previous experience of HE (including FDs). The second chart below, (figure 4) illustrates the correlation between highest level of previous education and employer sponsorship respectively, which shows that the employer sponsored cohort are the group with the most previous HE experience.
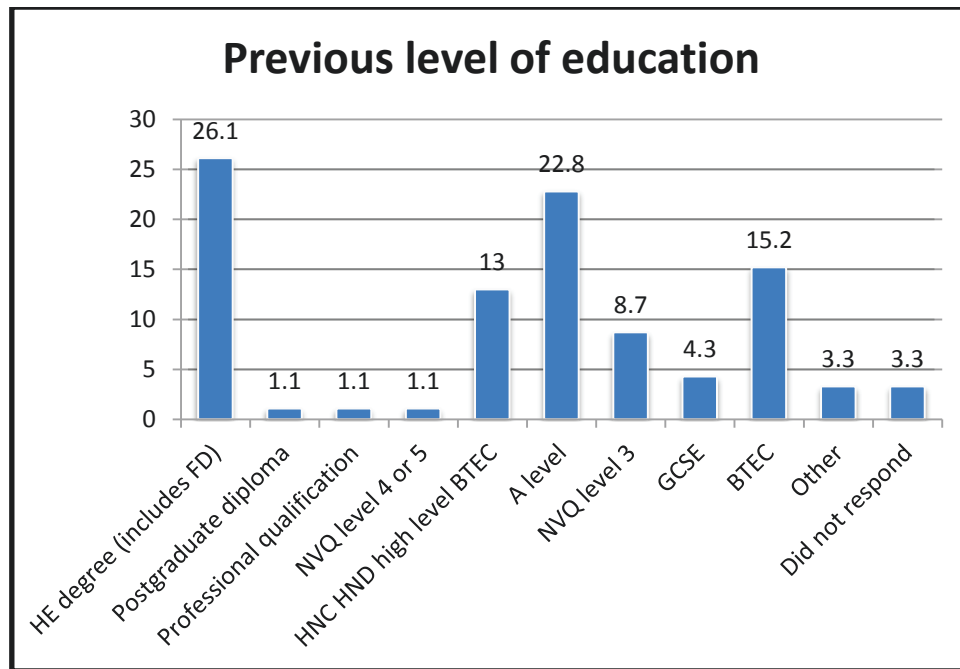
Figure 3: Highest level of qualification
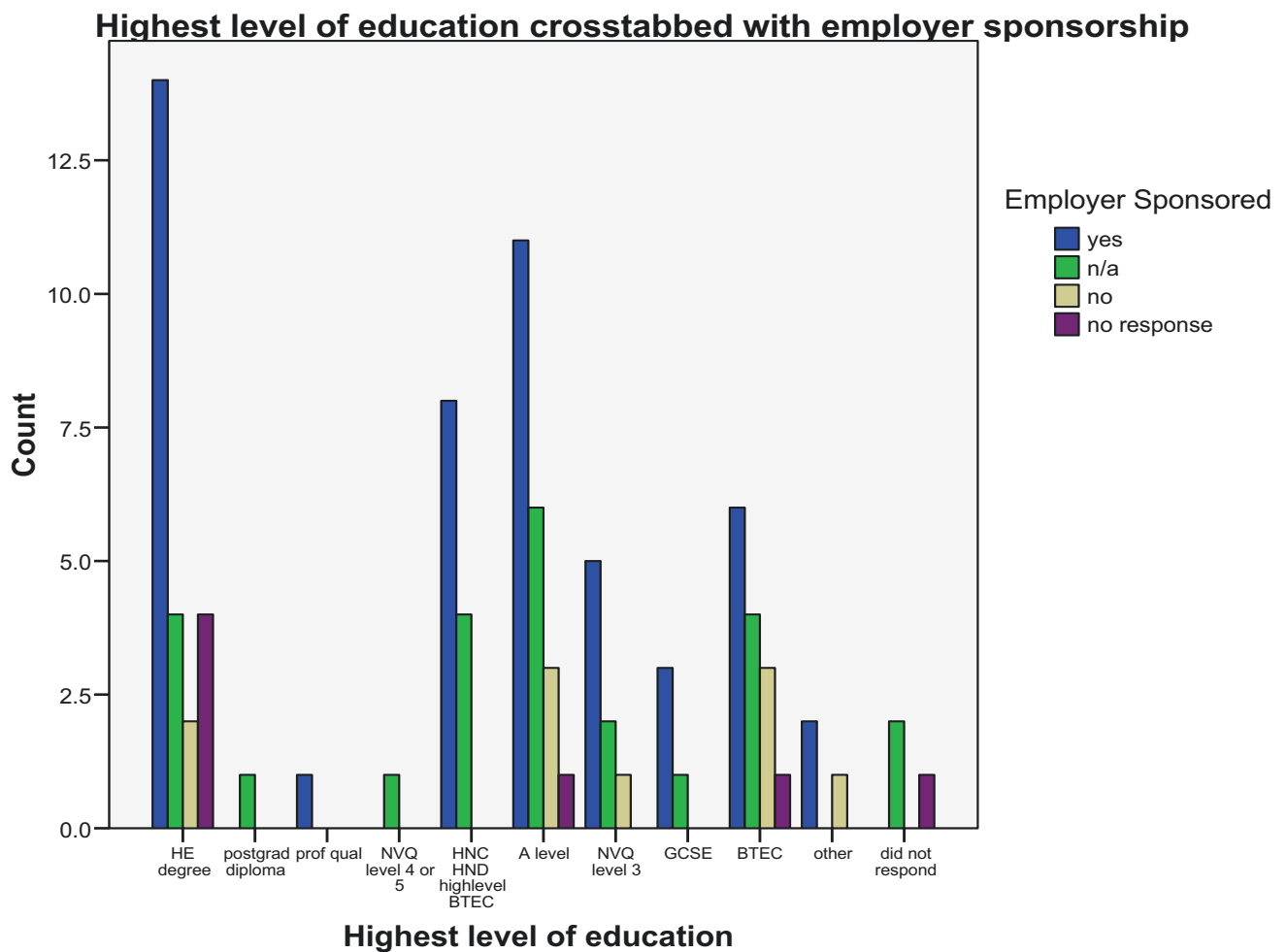

Highest level of education

Figure 4: Relationship between highest level of education and employer sponsorship

3.2   Reasons for studying HE in FE

Exploring why learners chose to undertake a higher education course in a further education college revealed the complexity of learners' lives and how this impacted on their decision making process. Learners cited a number of reasons for their choice of course and college. For some learners who were sponsored by their employer there was no choice in which college they attended. Some learners chose college as they had been out of education for some time and wanted a more practical approach to learning, and smaller class sizes. Some said that for their subject the college course was a better choice, with the college providing better equipment and facilities – this was especially important to learners in visual arts. Many pointed to the benefits of studying locally, with reduced travel time and costs, as they were also often balancing work and families around their studies. Although costs of the course were not a primary consideration in most cases, many learners still pointed out that they preferred to pay lower fees for the same degree as at an HEI, and therefore costs of courses did affect decision making.

Learners' expectations of the courses they were studying included smaller class sizes than an HEI, more practical work (although still academically challenging), more time with teaching staff than in an HEI and in some instances that the subject matter they were learning was more relevant and up to date, particularly for those studying as part of a work sponsored programme.

3.2.1   Location

For many learners the location or place where learning is delivered is the most important practical consideration.

> *"Well me, for example. I live near Victoria Station, so it's just a walking distance"*

Minimising travelling time is important for learners who not only manage domestic responsibilities but also juggle work commitments as well. Location is also bound up with costs of travelling and parking.

> *"Easy to get here - I am a single parent so – it was easy - the times suited me – there's a lot of single parents on the course so… it's tailor made"*

> *"I'm very much in the same boat – and parking – even though you're not supposed to park at Tesco for a period of time – 3 hours, move the car – and even the multi story is not that expensive if you are in three days a week like we are, so.."*

Yet for others, psychologically the place of learning is important because they see people like themselves there. Some learners expressed discomfort about university as being: *"…not for the likes of us."*

3.2.2   Costs

The fee levels set by colleges offer learners an important alternative to the fees set by universities and other HEIs. The majority of respondents (46%) were financing their study through student loans, although a significant proportion (31%) was sponsored by their employer. This can be seen in the chart below.
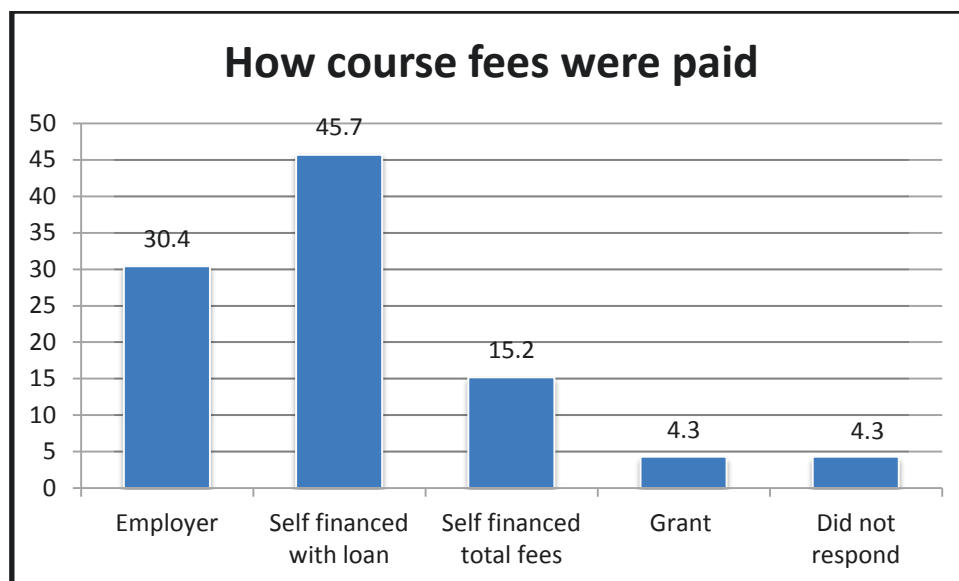
How course fees were paid

Category	Value
Employer	30.4
Self financed with loan	45.7
Self financed total fees	15.2
Grant	4.3
Did not respond	4.3

Figure 5: Payment of course fees

For many, cost seems to be a lower order criterion in their decision making, albeit an important one, after location and course.

> *"So it seems that money and finance are very important – was this a consideration for your individual decisions to come here? Was that the primary concern – if not then what was?*
>
> *It was the tutor first for me – and explaining the course and what you could do afterwards and how that would tie in with the other course and then obviously – well I can afford to do it – so finance was my second thing after I'd heard about it being good and then obviously student services helped me a lot.*
>
> *For me it was finance and the tutors and again the really small classes."*

3.2.3 Employer sponsored students

A number of learners who participated in the study who were sponsored by their employer to undertake their study had no choice in where they studied, either because they were on an in-service course at their own institution or because their employer had contracted with a particular college to deliver the course. Where employer sponsored learners did have a choice of where to study, location – proximity to work or home – became even more important. As one employer sponsored learner commented:

> *"Well, we have one day off a week to come to uni, its important that we don't take too long out to travel."*

4   Teaching and Learning

We asked learners to tell us about their teaching and learning at their college: exploring pedagogy, learning styles, the tutorial system, and access to teaching staff. Many of the focus group participants expressed a preference for practice over theory and of learning through practice. For some the quality of teaching was uneven and access to teaching staff challenging, however the majority of learners were relatively satisfied with the quality of teaching and found teaching staff to be supportive. In summary, they felt that in terms of teaching and learning the delivery of HE in FE met their needs.

4.1   Induction

In exploring respondents' experience of teaching and learning and college facilities (discussed in the subsequent section on Infrastructure – Facilities and services) the apparent absence of an adequate induction emerged as an important concern, from learners across colleges, and subject areas. Some learners reported that they did not have a formal induction and those that did felt it was less than satisfactory. The absence of an induction led one learner to comment:

> *"Doesn't make you feel welcomed."*

Others commented on how the lack of an induction had impacted on their study:

> *"And you know in terms of learning not having an induction, I find it really difficult accessing information, so you know just looking up journals [online] ….Here I'm just struggling to find my way round it. I went to the computer people upstairs and asked them if they could give me a course and they looked at me as if I was completely mad and said: ' well that's not really my thing I can show you how to do this and that.' "*

Where learners did have an induction many felt that it was less than satisfactory.

> *"…our first week here was a week full of lectures we had an hour induction."*

> *"…we got our cards from reception and found someone at the gate to tell us what room we were in – and then we got a double sided A4 bit of paper – and that was our induction."*

> *"I took a whole day off work, thinking that it would be important…My induction was basically enrolment."*

These concerns about induction are not exclusive to FECs in general or HE in FE students in particular, but are shared by students and staff in HEIs. As Crooks and Parmar (2006) note: *"It is clear that the universities must offer a more student-focused induction experience if students are to take seriously what is arguably one of the most important aspect of their first academic year."*

4.2   Teaching and Learning

Many learners spoke of the small class sizes in their courses as a very positive thing. Those who had experienced HE at an HEI in particular found small class sizes beneficial and even learners who had no HEI experience were uncomfortable with the thought of attending lectures with hundreds of other students. They suggested that this would not be a good learning environment for them, and many said that they would be reticent in this context of asking questions in front of such a large student group. However, it must be noted that while a handful of learners had direct experience of

HEIs most did not – and possibly there is a misunderstanding here of the lecture/tutorial systems at HEIs.

The vast majority of learners we spoke with said that their tutors were extremely helpful. This included offering information, advice and guidance pre-entry, as well as on-course support. Whilst there appears to be a variety of practice not only between, but also within colleges, in terms of tutorial arrangements (one-to-one) most learners commented that they were able to access their tutors outside of class if necessary. They pointed to the accessibility of the teaching staff, and the promptness of replies to their e-mails and other enquiries. Most learners were comfortable asking questions in class, and often tutors would stay back after class to answer questions.

> *"We're dead practical learners on our course – the majority of the course offers that – for you to be able to go away and try and if there's a problem – the tutor is there to say – well you say I want to do this but I have no idea how to do it – so you kind of like give yourself an idea and then they push that learning so that you are competent."*

> *"Sometimes if you've got a problem with something – within that lecture they'll see you like for 10 minutes or something."*

> *"Yeah, or at the end of the lesson.*

> *Our tutors will stay and will just see you, even before the lesson or after.*

> *In the years I've been here I've never had any problems approaching anyone.*

> *We do have structured times though sometimes – like coming towards the end of an assignment they'll give us structured time, plus additional if you need it.*

> *With us you can ask any time you want."*

Not all comments were so positive, reflecting the mixed nature of access to teachers between colleges, and subject areas.

> *"Apart from seeing them in class, can you access them at any other time?*

> *E-mail them.*

> *OK. E-mail. And what do you ask them typically and what's the response time?*

> *Couple of weeks.*

> *Depends on the tutor.*

> *Some of the tutors only work here a couple of days."*

Other comments about teaching staff pointed out that many were still practicing in their fields, alongside their teaching duties. This was seen to be of benefit to the learners, as they were receiving practical and up-to date, industry standard information from the teaching staff.

> *"Are most of your tutors industry experienced?*

Some of them.

And those tutors are the best ones.

One of them still works in industry. They are amazing tutors. We look forward to them. We only have one of them now it's a shame. We get a lot out of them.

Do they keep themselves up to date by continuing to practice?

Yes, definitely."

4.3   Tutorial System

Overall learners were unclear as to whether a tutorial system operated within their college, and if it did, what they could expect from their tutor in terms of support.

"…What tutorial system?"

"I've never had a tutorial – I don't even know what one was – so I just tend to come to college go to the lectures and go back home and work on it on my own."

"…a few times other tutors have asked me – who is your year tutor and I say I don't know who it is. I say "A" but its not – he's the head of the course so we've not been allocated anyone."

"I put in a request for a tutorial on 10 February and… I've been offered a tutorial date of 21st March. And I thought she'd put the wrong date."

Where learners found it difficult to access their assigned personal tutor most overcame this by seeking advice and guidance from other teaching staff.

"We haven't seen our tutor this year and in the third year it is the most important year. But I'm lucky I've had other lecturers… have just been really kind. But as a personal tutor he's just been really non-existent."

A few learners were positive about the tutorial system at their college.

"…it's pretty flexible in my experience you just contact them and they'll say come and see me tomorrow afternoon – or if they're in you just go and see them."

4.4   Teaching Staff

In discussing the quality and effectiveness of teaching staff, learners in all of the focus groups were at pains to point out that the quality of teaching varied – with some of their teachers identified as below average whilst others were identified as enthusiastic and expert with up to date industry knowledge.

"Some tutors are enthusiastic about what they do, and help you and really care. Others just come here, get paid for it then leave. They don't really care about the students."

> *"We are lucky here. You get a lot of one-to-ones here, they give you the basics that you maybe don't know. Our tutors give us the skills we need. They explain things to us and why we should do them."*

> *"The teachers are really supportive… they don't mind just to go on and on with the same thing."*

Yet within the same focus group a learner on a different course within the same faculty reported:

> *"We had a recent assignment and the tutor didn't know how to do it and couldn't explain it and then it dropped our grades."*

Learners also recognised that whilst some of their lecturers were knowledgeable and had up to date industry experience they lacked the ability to deliver this effectively.

> *"…he wasn't a teacher basically – he knew his stuff but I think there's a couple of lecturers who have been brought in because they know their stuff but they can't teach."*

4.5 Class Sizes

Class size was raised as an issue by a number of learners when talking about why they chose to study at college as well as when thinking about teaching and learning. Learners thought that the class sizes at college would be smaller, compared to university.

> *"So the whole college appeals to me because there's a relationship between you and your tutor. So I'd probably go for college because more it's more intimate rather than at a university."*

They indicated that they felt more comfortable in smaller classes, as opposed to mass lectures, and therefore had the opportunity to establish a better relationship with their teachers.

> *"I think some employers might find it a benefit to have done your degree at a college. It's much smaller, more tight knit groups and – I found when I did my uni degree it was so big and you could tell there were a lot of students that weren't getting the best out of it – from their tutors – from the facilities because it was just too big – there were too many students all there at the same time. I find it better at college because it's smaller."*

> *"I needed that more of a class hands-on setting because of being out of education I wanted to feel like I was part of a class rather than turn up to a lecture where there's 40 or 50 people there and just being a number."*

Smaller class sizes were also valued as they gave the learners better access to teaching staff:

> *"Our tutors really are fantastic in terms of being able to access them – they do leave you to get on with it but if you need them they're there."*

4.6   Assignment Feedback

Whilst we did not specifically ask about assignments, learners in most of the focus groups talked about assignments and feedback. In a couple of the focus groups learners expressed concern that teaching staff were inconsistent and vague about the basic requirements for assignments such as word counts. In these cases learners felt that the absence of a programme or course handbook with: *"rules and regs.."* compounded the problem.

Again, in a small number of focus groups learners expressed concern about the quality of the feedback and the length of time taken to mark and return work. Learners understood that assignments had to be moderated but felt genuinely aggrieved that they were unable to receive comments or feedback before commencing their next assignment.

> *" Eight weeks after an assignment we've just got it back today. Which I find completely astonishing."*

> *"I was told by one of the tutors that it should be two weeks but because the group is so big* [37 students] *it won't be two weeks. And is and I was horrified that was happening."*

> *"Yeah I got a feedback from with just one word on it and the other one was just scribbles I couldn't read anyway."*

Other learners were more positive

> *"They usually stick to their marking deadlines. They know we would take it further if they didn't."*

> *"…direct feedback is really good as well – to every single person – not just the grades."*

A comment endorsed by learner in same focus group:

> *"Yeah and things you can work on"*

5   Infrastructure – Facilities and services

In this section we set out learners' views on their college's infrastructure, the physical facilities and services supporting HE in FE provision. It is important to note that a number of factors including: tradition and mission; geographical location and estates; extent of HE provision; and budgets will influence not only the level of provision but the degree to which it is integrated or separated within the college.

When we asked learners about the facilities at their college most were satisfied with the general facilities offered. Indeed for some learners the college's facilities were the primary reason to go to the college rather than the local university.

> *"I come here because of the facilities."*

> *"The equipment at university is terrible. It's much better here."*

"Before I came here, I actually checked up the details of the university, then came and had a look, so I knew where I was going before I started the course. The equipment here is much better. I looked at the studios and check(ed) it out before I came here. "

Art and Design students in particular found that these subject specialist facilities to be particularly good. These included design studios, photography equipment, 3-D modelling and editing suites. Library, IT and VLE facilities were also discussed, and, on the whole, the learners we spoke with were satisfied with these facilities.

5.1   IT facilities

On the whole learners were satisfied with the facilities on offer here, aside for some access issues, which by no means is a problem that is exclusive to colleges. In fact this problem of adequate IT provision can be found in all types of learning organisations, from schools to HEIs, and the following comments from the focus groups need to be acknowledged in light of this.

"There's 6 Apple Macs that nobody uses, and then the rest of the computers are always taken anyway. Which is the biggest problem which ends up in us having to bring our laptops and then there's problems with the internet connections and things like that, then you have to go to the IT suite, and then by the time you've figured it out its half way through the time you've got to spend on assignments."

"Across in the construction building, there are unbelievable amounts of computer suites, most rooms over there are fully fitted with computers but you're not allowed to use them through the dinner times because you're unsupervised. So over there no one will be there, but it's packed with computers. So everyone is over here. So everyone is trying to pile into one room and there just isn't enough."

"Can I just jump back onto what we were saying about facilities and accessibility, in terms of IT, if I could actually get on and get access to use the facility, I wouldn't anyway, because part of the problem we've got is all the software is out of date anyway. All the computers have Microsoft Office 2003, everyone else is using 2010. You can store your bibliography and all your results in the new format but it looses it in the old one – they aren't compatible. Then I have to save it down, and lose my bibliography with the incompatibility. So I just use my laptop, not the college facilities."

5.2   E-learning – Virtual Learning Environments (VLE)

All learners we spoke with were aware of their college's VLE. However, not all of the learners felt that this was of use to them due to the fact that the teaching staff did not always update the information found here.

"…well, there's no point if they're never updated – I tried to find some coursework one day – and it was the last years' coursework still up there"

"All I've used it for is when the exams are on and for past papers – even then if you need a timetable or things for college – you try to find to it on there – but that's not on there."

Where there have been problems here, learners have substituted the official VLE with other forms of online media to share information.

"We text and e-mail each other."

"…we started a Facebook group instead."

It must be again noted, that the issues around take-up of e-learning resources are certainly not limited to the FE sector. In fact a recent report commissioned by Linking London LLN, and conducted by Continuum at UEL around e-learning resources in their partner institutions (a mix of HEIs, FECs and specialist colleges) found similar issues (Berzins & Hudson, 2011). One of the key findings of that research was that although there is a high level of provision of e-learning resources (particularly VLEs), the use of these resources was uneven, and often times depended on individual teaching staff who acted as "e-learning champions" for their subject areas. From a learners' perspective, the "luck of the draw" as to whether their particular course utilises these resources to their fullest extent means that some will have access to useful e-learning resources, while others will not.

5.3   Library facilities

When asked about the general facilities of the learners' respective colleges, the libraries were generally very well regarded. The books and journals were seen as relevant to the courses and the library staff were identified as being particularly helpful. While there were some issues around noise and access, comments about college libraries were generally very positive.

> *"I had a really good experience this week. I popped in, it must have been 8pm, and I saw a librarian about a specific issue and she took me right to the section, she had set up a system for the library and took me through it all and went though everything. She knew it all off the top of her head. It was really interesting to see it from a librarian's (point of view), they are really knowledgeable. I came out of there with 8 books, all really good."*

> *"…yeah I found that – I went in and needed to print something off and I didn't know where it was coming from and they helped and she didn't look at me like I was an alien."*

The problems expressed with libraries were not to do with the facilities as such, but more to do with access to IT, which will be covered in the IT and access sections below.

5.4   Facilities at partner HEI

Many of the learners we spoke with had access to the HEI library that was validating their course. Although many were aware of this, very few learners used this facility. A few learners told us that they had not received library cards from the HEI – however they said that they probably would not use these facilities anyway as they were too far away, and the college libraries were viewed as good resources that had all the resources the learners needed.

> *"Do you use the university at all – well, can you use the university (facilities) at all?*
>
> *(All say yes)*
>
> *We don't need to*
>
> *No, we don't need to because what the college offers is good enough, so…*
>
> *I thought I would actually, I thought I would use it more but I haven't used it at all."*

5.5 Designated HE area

A recurring theme across colleges was the desire by the HE students to have an area of their own, as many learners told us that that the libraries and other areas of the college could get noisy due to younger learners using these facilities. Only one college we visited had an established HE area – although other colleges were in the process of providing this for their HE students. This HE area was considered important for the main reason that HE students needed a quiet space to study, away from the bustling college environment and younger learners.

> *"Someone mentioned earlier about a HE area behind glass doors, is that important to have that area?*
>
> *Yes.*
>
> *It's quiet.*
>
> *It's a separation, it's a lot quieter. People are going there to study, not just cock about."*

6 HE ethos

Whilst learners spoke about the importance of services, facilities and equipment, some of which they felt was far superior to that offered at the local HEI, they also spoke about the importance of these services and facilities in terms of: demarcation, differentiation and prioritisation.

Some expressed this tentatively: *"I don't want to sound snobby…but…"* and then proceeded to explain why they thought there should be separate or differentiated facilities or a higher priority for HE learners.

> *"Sometimes it's quite discouraging when you're surrounded by a lot of FE students just messing around – it just doesn't feel professional."*
>
> *"It's like being in a sixth form common room."*

It is not uncommon to hear postgraduate learners at HEIs express the same concerns in relation to their own institution and undergraduate students.

6.1 Learner identity

Whilst time prevented us from doing so in any great depth, we wanted to explore with respondents how they identified themselves as learners. We endeavoured to tease out whether they saw themselves as "university" or "FE college" students and how the represented themselves to others. There were vastly different answers to this question within the focus groups. A significant minority of students told us that they do tell their friends and family that they are *"at uni"* or *"studying a degree"* although the majority say that *"I am at college".*

Prompting and probing around this theme provoked some interesting conversations around the way in which studying at a college was perceived as being *"second rate"* by those who were outside this system. Most of the learners said they did not care about this misunderstanding and were overall very satisfied with their college course. Indeed many found this attitude amusing and pointed to the fact that they felt they were getting a much better "deal" than students at HEIs – with smaller class

sizes, more attentive teaching staff and lower fees. The learners we spoke with were very aware of the benefits they were getting from the college system, as opposed to studying a similar course at a university.

> *"I think some employers might find it a benefit to have done your degree at a college. It's much smaller, more tight knit groups and – I found when I did my uni degree it was so big and you could tell there were a lot of students that weren't getting the best out of it – from their tutors – from the facilities because it was just too big – there were too many students all there at the same time. I find it better at college because it's smaller."*

> *"I think it depends, with me I need tutor input, I need a structure. And at university you're sort of left to be more independent. So the whole college appeals to me because there's a relationship between you and your tutor. So I'd probably go for college because more it's more intimate rather than at a university."*

7   Student engagement – Listening to learners

The increased recognition of the need to enhance student engagement within HE and the value to be derived from it is reflected in HEFCE's Strategic plan 2006-11 which states as one of its objectives: *" [to] work with students and other stakeholder to ensure a high-quality learning experience that meet the needs of students"* (HEFCE, 2007). This was attuned to the then Labour government's style of citizen engagement and the desire to *"amplify the student voice"* with the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills' student listening programme.

As Little, Locke, Sesca and Williams (2009) note, studies undertaken in the early to mid 2000's highlighted common concerns and issues around student feedback and representation. From their study on student engagement, commissioned by HEFCE, Little *et al* (2009) draw a number of conclusions about the nature and extent of student engagement in HE, including HE in FE; models of engagement, both formal and informal; institutions' rationales for student engagement, including measure of effectiveness and barriers.

The study concluded that whilst institutions saw student engagement as central to improving the student experience they viewed learners as passive consumers rather than active partners in the process and that practices varied within institutions. The National Student Survey - which is deployed in FE colleges delivering HE in FE - was recognised as having: *"sharpened institutional practices for action planning."* (Little *et al,* 2009:4) One of the main concerns was the extent to which HEIs were closing the feedback loop and keeping students informed of actions being taken.

Due to time constraints we were unable to explore student engagement in all of the focus groups, but where we did learners were able to articulate without any prompting the mechanisms their course and college used to engage with them. These included: the National Student Survey, course and module feedback questionnaires, student parliaments and HE forums. A number of learners indicated that they had participated in HE forums or served as a HE governor within their institution. Thos learners who had been most actively engaged, participating in a HE forum or serving as a HE governor, expressed dissatisfaction and frustration:

> *"It's what I call a box ticking exercise…"*

> *"Basically we all get together and we say what's going on. They say: 'OK' and then do nothing about it.*

But on further exploration, prompting and probing, this concern was brought on by a lack of clarity around planned actions and improvements resulting from student feedback – simply not closing the feedback loop. The variation of practice within institutions, highlighted by Little et al (2009), was confirmed by focus group participants, some of whom had completed module evaluations and other who had not, within the same institution.

The richness that an increasingly diverse student body in FE and HE brings also highlights the different attitudes and multiple motivations towards study at HE level, which will need to be taken into account when devising mechanisms to engage students. The busy lives that learners lead, highlighted by many of our respondents who need to study at a college close to home and work because of their domestic and work commitments, also need to be recognised.

8   Conclusions

Through the focus group sessions, we found that the research participants' demographics in terms of ethnicity, age and gender are broadly representative of the national HE picture, and therefore their comments can be seen as indicative of the general picture of HE in FE provision. It must be noted however, that qualitative data is not intended to be generalisable; rather that it gives fine grain detail to the subject under investigation. With this in mind, the learners' comments gave us a rich data set to explore the themes as reported above.

The findings show that overall there is a strong case to be made around the benefits of studying HE in an FE setting, in particular because of small class sizes that enable more one on one time with teaching staff, the location of FE colleges and the importance of local HE provision, the value for money that these courses often represent[1], and in some cases, better facilities and industry relevant information. Overwhelmingly, when asked about learning preferences, the learners in the focus groups told us that they were very practical learners, and that their colleges delivered well in this style of teaching and learning.

Where there were criticisms of the course content, or college facilities, such as lack of IT, questionable teaching quality, lack of information around tutorial systems (or indeed lack of systems here) or having to share college resources with noisy, younger learners, the researchers felt that most of these negatives were not FE specific, but that these problems were found in all educational institutions, including schools and HEIs. Perhaps the most serious concern raised by the learners we spoke with was the lack of induction. This issue was raised by those in a wide variety of courses, subject areas and colleges. The resolution of the induction problem would be of great benefit to HE in FE learners, and would also provide these learners with a sound grounding in their course information, which potentially could also address other concerns – such as outlining the tutorial system, and assessment mechanisms, which would make the HE in FE offer even stronger.

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[1] It must be noted that not all courses were considered to be good value for money.

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Appendix B – List of colleges

Bradford College
City College Norwich
City of Westminster College
Hull College
Northampton College
St. Helen's College
Westminster Kingsway College

Appendix C – List of courses

HND Interactive Digital Media
HND Digital Film Making
HNC Construction
HNC Electrical/Electronic Engineering
HNC Mechanical Engineering
HNC Operations
FD Applied Microbiology
FdA Arts & Wellbeing
FD Construction Project Management
FD Crime & Community Safety
FD Criminal Justice
FD Digital Media Journalism
FD Sport Studies
FdA Theatre & Performance
FdA Travel & Tourism Management

BA (Hons) Art & Design
BA Business Management
BSc Clinical Physiology
BA (Hons) Contemporary Surface Design & Textiles
BA (Hons) Criminal Justice (Top up)
BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies
BA (Hons) Fashion Design
BA Game Art
BA (Hons) Games Design
BA (Hons) Illustration
BA (Hons) Photography
MA Visual Arts
Diploma in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector (DTLLS)

Appendix D – Information sheet

Information Sheet

The purpose of this letter is to provide you with the information that you need prior to consenting to participate in this study.

Student Experience: HE in FE

Project Description
Continuum – the Centre for Widening Participation Policy Studies at UEL has been commissioned by the Association of Colleges to undertake research on about the student experience of Higher Education conducted in a Further Education setting. The aims of the study are to provide a clearer understanding of the student experience of HE in FE.

You are being asked to participate in a focus group discussion or interview. The discussion will be focused on gaining your insights into how you have experienced education and how expectations and aims have been realised.

Confidentiality of the Data
The interview tapes, subsequent transcripts of the tapes, and any notes taken will be given a code and your name will not appear anywhere with the data. Only the principal investigator, project manager, and administrative assistant will have access to the data. The data will be stored on password protected computer files and in a locked office.

Disclaimer
You are not obliged to take part in this study, and are free to withdraw at any time up to publication (25.03.11). Should you choose to withdraw from the interview process you may do so without disadvantage to yourself and without any obligation to give a reason.

Please feel free to contact us if you have questions about the *Student Experience: HE in FE* research project.

Karina Berzins, Senior Research Fellow, Continuum, UEL Email: k.e.berzins@uel.ac.uk

Tony Hudson, Research manager, Continuum, UEL Email: a.hudson@uel.ac.uk

Appendix E – Consent form

Student Experience: HE in FE

Consent Form

I have been given information about the Association of Colleges research project *Student Experience: HE in FE* and about the way in which my contribution will be used. I agree to take part in the study and give my permission for my contribution to be used on the basis that:

- My contribution will be kept safely and confidentially, with access only to those with permission from the project researchers.
- I can withdraw my consent at any time up to publication (25.03.11), by contacting the researchers.

I agree that my contribution can be used and disseminated by the researcher in subsequent research and publication, and that copyright for my contribution rests with the project researchers.

Do you want to be identified in the research publication?   Please tick the statements which apply to you:

❒   I give my permission for the information I am about to give/have given to be used for research purposes only (including publications and reports) and agree that I may be identified.

OR

❒   I give my permission for the information I am about to give/have given to be used for research purposes only (including publications and reports) and agree that I may not be identified.

AND

❒   I would like my name acknowledged in the list of contributors in the research report.   I understand that this will not link my name with any content or quotation.

I hereby fully and freely consent to participate in this study, and I understand that this will be audio taped and/or filmed, and this may be screened at the report launch event or via other outlets. Having given this consent I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the research at any time without disadvantage to myself and without being obliged to give any reason.

Name: (please print) _____

Signature: _____   Date: _____

Please feel free to contact us if you have questions about the *Student Experience: HE in FE* research project.

Karina Berzins, Senior Research Fellow, Continuum, UEL   Email: k.e.berzins@uel.ac.uk

Tony Hudson, Research Manager, Continuum, UEL   Email: a.hudson@uel.ac.uk

Appendix F – Demographic questionnaire

Student Experience: HE in FE
Background Questionnaire

Current study

Course/programme: _____

Mode of study: Full-time   ❑   Part-time   ❑

How are you financing the course fees? _____

_____

Prior Education

What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- ❑   Higher Education degree
- ❑   Postgraduate Diplomas and Certificates (including PGCE)
- ❑   Professional qualifications at degree level e.g. graduate member of professional institute, chartered accountant or surveyor
- ❑   NVQ or SVQ level 4 or 5
- ❑   HNC, HND, Higher level BTEC
- ❑   A level or equivalent
- ❑   NVQ or SVQ level 3
- ❑   Trade Apprenticeships
- ❑   GCSE/O Level grade A - C, SCE Standard or Ordinary grades 1-3
- ❑   NVQ or SVQ level 2
- ❑   BTEC
- ❑   NVQ or SVQ level 1
- ❑   Other Qualification _____

Employment

Are you currently employed? (self-employed?)   Yes ❏   No ❏

If yes   Full-time ❏   Part-time ❏

If part-time, how many hours a week do you work (approx)?   _____

Is your current work related to your course?   Yes ❏   No ❏

Does your employer provide any support/assistance? List (e.g. Time off/ financial support with fees)

_____

_____

_____

Demographic information

Gender   Male ❏   Female   ❏

Date of Birth   _ ___/_____/____

Ethnicity

❏   Asian - Bangladeshi   ❏   Black - Other black background
❏   Asian - Chinese   ❏   White
❏   Asian - Indian   ❏   Mixed - Other mixed background
❏   Asian - Other Asian background   ❏   Mixed - White and Asian
❏   Asian - Pakistani   ❏   Mixed - White and Black African
❏   Black - African   ❏   Mixed - White and Black Caribbean
❏   Black - Caribbean   ❏   Other ethnic background

Which of the following best describes your household type?

❏   Single   ❏   Lone parent/carer: dependent
❏   Couple No Children   children
❏   Couple: dependent children   ❏   Lone parent/carer: non-dependent
❏   Couple: non-dependent children   children

Do you have a disability?   Yes ❏   No ❏

Parental education

What is the highest level of education your *mother* has completed?

- ❑ Higher Education degree
- ❑ Postgraduate Diplomas and Certificates (including PGCE)
- ❑ Professional qualifications at degree level e.g. graduate member of professional institute, chartered accountant or surveyor
- ❑ NVQ or SVQ level 4 or 5
- ❑ HNC, HND, Higher level BTEC
- ❑ A level or equivalent
- ❑ NVQ or SVQ level 3
- ❑ Trade Apprenticeships
- ❑ GCSE/O Level grade A - C, SCE Standard or Ordinary grades 1-3
- ❑ NVQ or SVQ level 2
- ❑ BTEC
- ❑ NVQ or SVQ level 1
- ❑ Other Qualification _____

What is the highest level of education your *father* has completed?

- ❑ Higher Education degree
- ❑ Postgraduate Diplomas and Certificates (including PGCE)
- ❑ Professional qualifications at degree level e.g. graduate member of professional institute, chartered accountant or surveyor
- ❑ NVQ or SVQ level 4 or 5
- ❑ HNC, HND, Higher level BTEC
- ❑ A level or equivalent
- ❑ NVQ or SVQ level 3
- ❑ Trade Apprenticeships
- ❑ GCSE/O Level grade A - C, SCE Standard or Ordinary grades 1-3
- ❑ NVQ or SVQ level 2
- ❑ BTEC
- ❑ NVQ or SVQ level 1
- ❑ Other Qualification _____

Name: (please print) _____

Signature: _____   Date: _____

Please feel free to contact us if you have questions about the *Student Experience: HE in FE* research project.

Karina Berzins, Senior Research Fellow, Continuum, UEL   Email: k.e.berzins@uel.ac.uk
Tony Hudson, Research manager, Continuum, UEL   Email: a.hudson@uel.ac.uk

Appendix G – Data Tables

Table 1 – Gender

	Frequency	Percent
Male	35	38.0
Female	57	62.0
Total	**92**	**100.0**

Table 2 – Age

	Frequency	Percent
16 - 19	6	6.5
20 - 24	27	29.3
25 - 29	19	20.7
30 - 44	24	26.1
45 - 59	8	8.7
60 - 69	1	1.1
No response	7	7.6
Total	**92**	**100.0**

Table 3 – Ethnicity

	Frequency	Percent
Asian Bangladeshi	1	1.1
Asian Indian	3	3.3
Asian other	1	1.1
Asian Pakistani	1	1.1
Black African	3	3.3
Black Caribbean	1	1.1
White	77	83.7
Mixed (other mixed)	1	1.1
Other	1	1.1
No response	3	3.3
Total	**92**	**100.0**

Table 4 – Household type

	Frequency	Percent
Single	43	46.7
Couple: no children	21	22.8
Couple: dependent children	13	14.1
Couple: non-dependent children	6	6.5
Lone parent /carer: dependent children	6	6.5
No response	3	3.3
Total	**92**	**100.0**

Table 5 –Disability

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	5	5.4
No	85	92.4
No response	2	2.2
Total	**92**	**100.0**

Table 6 – What is the highest level of education you have completed?

	Frequency	Percent
HE degree	24	26.1
Postgraduate diploma	1	1.1
Prof qualifications	1	1.1
NVQ level 4 or 5	1	1.1
HNC, HND, higher level BTEC	12	13.0
A level	21	22.8
NVQ level 3	8	8.7
GCSE	4	4.3
BTEC	14	15.2
Other	3	3.3
No response	3	3.3
Total	**92**	**100.0**

Table 7 – Mode of study

	Frequency	*Percent*
Full-time	51	55.4
Part-time	28	30.4
Part-time block release	13	14.1
Total	**92**	**100.0**

Table 8 – How are you financing the course fees?

	Frequency	**Percent**
Employer	28	30.4
Self finance - loan	42	45.7
Self finance all	14	15.2
Grant/bursary	4	4.3
No response	4	4.3
Total	**92**	**100.0**

Table 9 – Are you currently employed?

	Frequency	**Percent**
Yes	66	71.7
No	25	27.2
No response	1	1.1
Total	**92**	**100.0**

Table 10 – Full time and part time employment

	Frequency	**Percent**
Full-time	33	35.9
Part-time	33	35.9
Not applicable	24	26.1
No response	2	2.2
Total	**92**	**100.0**

Table 11 – Is your employment work related?

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	46	50.0
No	17	18.5
Not applicable	24	26.1
No response	5	5.4
Total	**92**	**100.0**

Table 12 – Do you get support from your employer?

	Frequency	Percent
Time off	19	20.7
Fee payment	2	2.2
Not applicable	27	29.3
No support	11	12.0
Time off and fees	24	26.1
Yes	2	2.2
No response	7	7.6
Total	**92**	**100.0**