

### **NW Network Group**

**Universities of Bolton, Central Lancashire, Chester, Cumbria and Manchester and the HE in FE partner colleges – Bradford, Blackpool and Fylde, Burnley, Stockport and West Cheshire.**

**Sustaining and developing the NW Network of the Art Design Media Subject Centre of the Higher Education Academy (ADM-HEA).**

### **Project**

**“ The 3E’s project – student expectations, experiences and encounters with HE and staff perceptions”**

### **Final Project Report**

#### **Project Overview**

The successfully completed *Research Informed Teaching* project (2006/7) by the NW network group resulted in case studies used as resources for the ADM-HEA. The regional seminar (March 2007) provided an opportunity to disseminate the findings as well as enabling additional staff from HEI’s and HE in FE to become acquainted with the project and provide additional names for the database. As a result of this work the 3E’s project was put forward with a key ambition of involving our colleagues based in the region’s HE in FE provision and to support the development of other regional networks for ADM-HEA. We wish to acknowledge the support of ADM-HEA and the individual institutions in supporting the outcomes of the project.

The overall aims of the Network are:

- To develop a regional network that is based on aspects of learning, teaching and research which references both the individual agendas of institutions in the North West and the ways in which they are responding to the aims of ADM-HEA
- To ensure that information and knowledge about the activities of ADM-HEA in relation to good practice and approaches to the student learning experience are disseminated both regionally, nationally and where appropriate internationally.
- To encourage additional individuals to join the ADM-HEA database, extending and enhancing the breadth of subject expertise available.

- To promote constructive exchange between HEIs and FECs especially from the perspective of HE in FE.

This project had as its key aim the further development and sustainability of a regional network inclusive of both HEI's and FE providers who deliver HE in Art, Design and Media where responses to the broader regional and national agendas are in support of the aims of ADM-HEA.

The following individual staff took part in the project:

Glenda Brindle (UCLan), Steve Reid (Burnley), Michael Moore (Chester), Angie Berwick (West Cheshire), Rachel Studd (Manchester), Mandy Smith (Stockport), John Woodman (Cumbria), Mark Manning (Bradford – now at MMU), Jill Fernie Clark (previously at Blackpool and Fylde) and Barbara Thomas (Bolton – project lead).

The regional focus in the approach of many NW institutions is partly a response to the national change agenda with its focus on widening participation and progression issues such as the introduction of vocational diplomas and the impact of demographic shifts. The establishment of Lifelong Learning Networks with a regional focus is evidence of responses to this national agenda. The Network is aware of the activity of projects involving student progression, development of CPD opportunities and mapping of progression routes in the region. As a consequence this project was driven by a distinctive strategy with a focus on the student experience.

An additional added value aspect of the project has been the opportunity to grow a research culture between staff based in HE and staff delivering HE in FE colleges in the region and to build on work from the research informed teaching project undertaken in 2006/7 through critical reflection on collaborative research.

Four key areas of investigation were identified which encompassed the life cycle of the student experience and partnerships were able to focus on those areas of familiarity or involvement, namely;

- Pre-entry
- On-entry
- On-course
- On completion

These are issues which all HEI's and HE in FE are addressing and their inclusion ensures parity of involvement in the project for all stakeholders across the HE landscape. The project has been exploring an analysis of differences in the two distinct contexts of HE and HE in FE and will consider what can be learnt from each other and how to collaborate with each other.

It was anticipated that the project would support 4 key activities for the network

1. To grow the network by involving more staff across the NW in the work of the network and in particular those staff delivering HE in FE
2. To obtain student views and staff perceptions on the 3E's
3. To ascertain whether process and practice in the four areas of investigation are different in HE and HE in FE and what can be learnt from good practice across the NW
4. Facilitating the sharing of good practice through critical reflection on collaborative research.

The report is focused around the following headings

1. Institutional Context
2. Overarching methodology and approach in context
3. Literature review
4. Student Feedback
5. Staff Feedback
6. Overall findings
7. Reflection on Collaborative research
8. Recommendations.

### **1. Institutional Context**

Four post 92, one Russell group university and 5 regional FE colleges delivering HE in FE were involved in the project. It was agreed that the approaches at collaborative partnership level would be agreed locally but that all partnerships would work around the key questions within the questionnaire that was developed. One of the results of this local level approach was the difference in the way students responded and thus the reaching of an agreement for complete anonymity in the reporting for the sector as the research material could be seen as divisive for some and of benefit to others. All partners chose an approach to suit their individual circumstances and these included short 'post it' sessions before teaching started, away events with groups, face to face meetings and questionnaires given out in class as examples. The range of subject areas involved in the project were:

Community Arts, Design, Fashion, Fine Art, Graphics, Illustration, Marketing, Media and Music, Multimedia, Photography and Textiles. All specific programme titles have been removed to ensure anonymity.

### **2. Overarching methodology and approach in context**

Following agreement to undertake the project the original NW network looked for HE in FE partners willing to engage and develop the project. This approach has enabled the group to work with FE colleges across the broad region. A meeting was held at the University of Bolton to develop the questionnaire and methodology and to agree common outcomes. As a result of this meeting individual HE and HE in FE teams were asked to agree research methodologies and delivery approach including the development of a visual outcome and to then inform the project leader at Bolton.

The views of the student as 'customer' and 'learner', staff as 'deliverers of learning' were to be the main foci for the investigation. Aspects that were considered as prompts for the collaborative teams were:

For students:

*How do students feel included? (expectations)*

*What makes them feel excluded from the learning environment? (changes in perceptions)*

*How do they use the services on offer?*

*What worked well, what did not?*

For Staff:

*How do they match institutional missions against the needs of learners?*

*What approaches do they take to make students feel included and thus stay?*

*What has changed in how they undertake their role?*

*What are their perceptions of the "Art School" environment from an ideological and practical viewpoint?*

An aspect of difficulty at the early stage of the project was the absence of some HE partners and thus their HE in FE partners. This was as a result of staff changes and availability for meetings. To overcome this the project lead met with individual partnerships to outline the project, partner responsibilities and to discuss approaches. Where HE in FE partners were unavailable for these additional meetings the HE partner took responsibility for informing the HE in FE partner.

An interim report on progress was sent to ADM-HEA in February 2008 outlining developments to date and future plans. In addition a short article was produced for the *Networks* magazine about the benefits of collaborative research. Shared responsibility included the hosting of a network meeting at UCLan in September, where local level developments to date were shared and future activity and final timetable agreed.

In addition to the web resources a national seminar with the project as part focus is to be held at Bolton in 2009. A separate but interesting involvement for the group was an invitation to take part in a JISC focus group meeting on supporting the student experience that was held at Bolton in December 2008.

Each partnership has produced an individual report and these reflect the methodologies used by partners as well as primary data collected from students and staff. The individual reports have informed this overarching report but the reports themselves are indicative of the different but equally valid approaches and methodologies implemented. Some have focused on the use of quantitative data alongside qualitative data where others have focused on a more formalised report format. One report has particularly focused on the HE in FE experiences of students who will progress from Foundation Degrees to BA Honours 'top up' at

the HEI. These different approaches have provided a rich repository of findings. As part of ensuring ethical clearance the project was presented to the ethics committee in the School of Arts, Media and Education at Bolton along with a copy of the letter to students regarding their involvement and anonymity (if chosen) in the project. Individual partners agreed this within the context of their own institution and used the student letter as a focus for this.

Given the availability of student cohorts at the time and the possibilities embedded in the project little opportunity arose for access to data from students in their final year and where this is available represents a minority of the overall student views and findings.

A decision was taken to undertake a brief literature review as part of a longer term ambition to present the research outcomes for publication.

### **3. Literature review**

The 3 E's project contributes to existing research into the relationship between student expectations and their experiences in the initial year of undergraduate study. Watson (2006) suggests that the '*student*' experience is a '*compound concept that has begun to take on a life of its own*'. One of his propositions is that the student population is changing as traditional entry mechanisms change resulting in a population of students who replicate the 'population at large'. He argues for a 'consultative, and research based, approach to what students really want and need'. Austerlitz et al (2008) 'consider the evidenced and perceived range of expectations by both students and their tutors alongside the implicit 'ambiguity' of the art school experience. Whilst this project has not specifically looked at this aspect it would appear that the findings demonstrate some aspects of this ambiguity from the student perspective and perception.

In looking at the attitudes of both staff and students this project relates to the work of Shank (1996) who has examined expectations from the perspectives of both students and staff. His results show that '*student expectations of these expectations vary by university type*'.

The majority of recent work available relates to students expectations of HE and the analysis of the dramatic increase in negative comments by students responding to their situation 'now' can usefully be informed by the work of others such as Braxton, Vesper and Hossler who have investigated the work done by Tinto in the 1970s to look at the relationship between unmet expectations and retention.

In their preliminary findings Longden and Yorke (2006) refer to the likely withdrawal of students being influenced by no pre entry knowledge of the institution and this appears to be a distinctive and a very real strength within the institutions involved in the 3E's project.

Booth's (1997) research suggests that students' performance is powerfully influenced by perceptions and responses conditioned by previous experience of learning in their subject.

The results of research undertaken by Cook and Leckey (1999) confirm that students bring with them and retain the study habits that they acquired in their previous institution *'in spite of staff expectations that students will work more independently and the reality of decreased access to staff support'*.

Staff comments about managing student expectations are supported by the work of Pancer (2000) and his team who have shown that *'students with more complex expectations about university tended to adjust better to stressful circumstances than did students who had simpler expectations'*. The disparity between student expectations and their actual experience is also investigated by Lowe and Cook (2003) who shows that *'There was a student expectation that lecturers would dictate notes and this was not borne out by experience'*. This relates to the detrimental effect of bad communication picked up in the 3 E's project and also studied by Dobos (1998) who *'investigates how communication predispositions promote or detract from individual students' motivation'*.

It would appear that to date there are no other comparative analyses of the expectations and experiences of students in HE and HE in FE institutions.

#### **4. Student Feedback**

The total number of students who took part in the research was 529 across all institutions and the explicit evidence is available in the individual reports. The approaches agreed and implemented in context by the group made the involvement of students manageable, focused and energetic.

##### ***Pre-entry***

Students had predominantly positive experiences in both HE and HE in FE. Staff attitudes were described variously as approachable, encouraging, stimulating and this was particularly helpful to less confident applicants who valued this welcoming aspect of the HE environment. This pre-entry familiarity of the programmes of study combined with meeting staff and students was a positive factor in the students' choice of place of study. Students were particularly pleased to have other students involved in the interview process and commented favourably on the informality of the interview process, the opportunity to ask questions and the interest staff took in their work. It was clear that this more personalised approach, was a strength and a key factor in the pre-entry choices of students of where to study. Some additional comments about peripheral but clearly important issues for students such as social activity and accommodation suggest that students want the broader experience of HE.

### ***On-Entry***

The induction process varied from HE to HE in FE. But common to all were the strengths highlighted by students about the friendly staff, conducive learning environments and in some cases the nurturing approach taken by the staff. The students generally felt that the induction period had informed them fully about the programmes of study, expectations and to appreciate the requirements of that study from developing the content through to assessment. Almost all institutions undertook group activities during the induction period as part of peer group bonding. In one institution this was link to external orientation because of high numbers of overseas students. A small number of students commented on their perceptions of group activities as being a waste of time. Some concern was expressed that the few who indicated that they found this interaction difficult may be informing inclusive peer group approaches at individual institutions for the future.

### ***On-Course (environment and retention)***

Student expectations were largely met and students generally felt that their expectations were the same as the actual experience particularly the focus on the creative 'art school' environment. There was some negativity post-induction relating to the match between student expectations and experience. In particular, this was a factor in the HE in FE student responses relating to the environment where this was not a specific HE community. The expectation that a HE student becomes an autonomous learner was understood in HE but less clearly understood in HE in FE. However this was not necessarily seen as a negative as students articulated an enjoyment of an individual approach to learning based on this approach. Students recognised the greater demands and challenges on them as they progressed between levels.

The majority of concerns for students at this stage were regarding communication, workload and financial pressures. The issues of communication (Organisation and Management) is a concern that has been identified in the lower NSS 2008 scores from students for this aspect. Facilities were also seen to impact negatively on students including car parking, staffing and refectories. These were particularly issues in institutions going through reconfiguration, campus moves and/or staffing changes. The library and other support mechanisms were rated highly overall by students. This reflects the findings of the NSS 2008 survey but in the context of this project is also a reflection of student feedback across all levels and not simply that of graduating students.

The supportive and specialist environments and designated work spaces were seen as an important factor in determining not only applications to study at a particular institution but also impacted on retention.

### ***On-Completion***

Although this was not a major aspect of the project because of the availability of students in their final year the data gathered is important. It confirms that

students had a positive experience that met their expectations. Although the work was harder than anticipated they had also learnt more than expected. In HE in FE the students indicated that the separation of HE from FE would create a more positive learning environment. The development of relationships in peer groups was an identified strength while financial concerns had reduced possibilities during the period of study for a small number. More feedback and better communication was highlighted but a key factor for some was the lifelong relationships made during their HE experience.

## **5. Staff Feedback**

33 staff took part in interviews for the research. The explicit evidence is available in the individual reports. Staff were asked to comment on pre-entry, induction, course (environment and retention), and to contextualise their answers against their own mission statement and to consider the role of the “*art school*” in the student experience.

\* the “*art school*” is used here as a definition to include all aspects of Art, Design and Media education.

### ***Pre-entry***

At both HE and HE in FE staff appear to place a lot of emphasis on making students feel included and emphasising the expectations of standards, independent learning and support for students. This is evident in the reports. Although not all staff were involved in pre-entry activities there were opportunities to work with feeder colleges leading to application and entry to programmes.

### ***On-entry***

The majority of staff interviewed were aware of the overarching institutional mission statements and the embedding of the student experience and career aspirations into these. In some cases this was referenced during induction. There was common agreement that induction was important in generating inclusiveness, helping students to settle into HE and promoting autonomous learning and a positive experience for staff and students.

### ***On-course (environment and retention)***

A range of teaching and learning approaches were identified including studio work, group work, critiques, tutorials and peer assessment which are fundamental to the personal and professional development of students. They emphasised the importance of the ‘art school’ ethos and its importance as a creative environment in a HE context and a factor in retention. In one HEI the lack of class contact was viewed as detrimental to the development of the student group while the lack of dedicated space in a HE in FE environment was seen to have a potential impact on retention.

## **6. Overall Findings**

Overall there was a clear picture of positive student experiences and expectations aligned with staff perceptions. Generally, students were much more

positive about their experiences at the times when members of staff were actively promoting feelings of being included. The pre-entry and interview experience of students is clearly very positive, the atmosphere, staff engagement and student involvement make this a strong aspect of the HE and HE in FE experience. Where HE in FE is seen as a strong, separate entity students see themselves as HE students.

Students and staff were willing to co-operate with the project and the majority of responses were positive. Different approaches to the research did mean that responses in some cases resulted in some negativity from students particularly in terms of reconfiguration of space, staffing, communication and aspects such as refectories, parking and VLE's. For some HE in FE students there is an assumption that there will be more hand holding than that which is available, a lack of understanding about the difference between HE and FE education and the expectation from staff that students will become autonomous learners.

The management of expectation and the increase in negativity post-induction highlights the need for further debate and raised awareness regarding the students' expectations of HE level study- especially regarding their independence and responsibilities for themselves and their peer group (important given the apparent need for higher level skills related to independence and team working in the workplace). Some issues of self-esteem and identity were identified in one HE in FE environment where students continue to see themselves as FE students.

The majority of student comments relating to open days, interviews and induction were linked to how they *felt* about their experiences, keywords like *friendly*, *welcoming* and *included* relate to the feelings evoked by their experiences. Course specific comments linked to negativity about group work at induction may not be unexpected, students enrol on a subject specific course but may lack the understanding at this early stage of collaborative activities in terms of managing future networking as part of creative industries employment.

When discussing their experiences 'now' the language used was more objective and related to practical issues such as resources, communication, finances and workload (particularly the theory/practice expectations) - there is little evidence that these were discussed at open day/ interview and therefore the student expectations of these issues and the development of autonomous learners could perhaps be managed at pre-entry points.

The flexible environment of the 'art school' was seen as a key factor in supporting students and preparing them for future careers in the creative industries but the lack of staff:student contact was seen to be eroding this in some cases.

Negative comments about resources were largely linked to space and the introduction of VLE platforms causing local level difficulties. Students indicated some alienation as a result of the latter. Libraries received positive comments reflecting NSS survey findings and this may be a useful pointer to learn and consider their approaches when developing L&T strategies. Approaches to participation, may also be an aspect for future consideration which is not only about cultural diversity but individual student needs.

## **7. Reflection on Collaborative research**

The project had developed from the previous NW network project on research informed teaching undertaken in 2006/7. Existing HE partners who had contributed to that project had indicated their interest in continuing working in the network and to find HE in FE partners for this collaborative approach. The approach and methodologies used had enabled staff to visit each other's institutions and to meet staff and students. This enabled comparative overviews of the agreed questions to be undertaken and the subtle but different approaches used has resulted in rich data for analysis, informing both local level strategies and enhancing sectoral knowledge.

Collaboration happened in a number of ways including:

*'The serendipitous meeting of a HE in FE partner through the first NW Network regional ADM seminar enabling a collaborative partnership to develop'.*

*'Meetings have largely taken place in offices or student refectories – chips and something, cups of tea – being common currency'.*

*'it was decided that we would start a collaborative partnership in a café bar halfway between the two establishments'*

Some partnerships were formed on the basis of more formal collaborative reasons including new partner relationships and one based on individual planning meetings between sector colleagues. Although there have been difficulties for some in contacting staff and gaining access to full student groups the experience overall has been a positive one, particularly learning from each other's experience. The following comments are indicative of the positive feedback from partners in the **3E's** project:

*'It's been good to share our experiences and views within a supportive and constructive environment'.*

*'This is my first experience of working on research across these two areas and I am finding it interesting, informative and a supportive experience. It has offered a valuable opportunity for me to broaden my network within HE'*

*education.'*

Good working relationships were developed:

*'it was really good to talk through how the students reacted to each other and us as staff'*

*'The collaboration has worked successfully and a very good working relationship was established from the beginning. Important for this was the joint planning, ideas and development day which set the scene and became a useful foundation for further collaborative initiatives during the course of the project'*

The opportunity to share ideas and develop a range of approaches has allowed students and staff to be very open and honest in some collaborative partnerships whilst in others has offered a more nurturing experience over a longer time period and this may have fostered the more positive comments from those approaches. Staff comments indicate that their individual approach was appropriate in the context of their own institutions confirming the decision to allow partners to use the agreed questions in context.

As with any continuing network group staff change, move on and new staff are brought on board. This is key in growing networks and developing relationships but the timing of this is not always helpful in terms of managing the project. Where this happened the role of the project lead in ensuring new partners are included and informed on developments is a factor in ensuring the project moves to conclusion. Although this ensures that information is disseminated this does not replace the project meetings where the discussion is broader, developmental and supportive. As with any project, meetings involving 10 institutions are a logistical nightmare and it is almost impossible, despite forward planning, for everyone to attend.

Although not all collaboration has been straightforward problems encountered have raised awareness of embedding approaches to minimise difficulties in future activity. Some of the barriers to successful collaboration included timescales, workloads and replacement cover particularly in FE where teaching workloads are higher. However any difficulties encountered were tempered by a clear message from partners about developing relationships:

*'We are willing to undertake this research and the opportunity to further strengthen working links'*

*'It became clear how the process as well as the product is important for the success of this project and for the purposes of building the NW network.'*

An additional key benefit has been the range of different but equally pertinent individual and network benefits articulated in the following comments.

*'It has been very interesting to discuss and explore experiences with a colleague from a different type of institution, this has helped to highlight the strengths of the different institution and also similar difficulties and pressures we face'.*

*'We have met a number of times and reviewed our findings and this has led to some interesting discussions'.*

*'Allocating enough time for each stage of the project was important in enabling the collaboration to flourish and for the preparation for meetings with students and staff'*

Generic good practice was highlighted as:

*'Encouragement to get to know about/participate in the work of the subject centre e.g. the annual forum, dissemination of information about the subject centre to colleagues and basic contact with other HE providers i.e. getting to know who is who'.*

*'The idea of collaborating with colleagues from other institutions certainly is beneficial and should be encouraged although time constraints are always an issue focussed projects help develop communication across the boundaries'.*

The motivation and commitment of the group is key to the development of the project to successful completion:

*'The shared responsibility has been a pleasure and we look forward to the outcomes'.*

*'The project overall has been an incredibly positive experience in terms of both analysing the students and their understanding their expectations, experiences and encounters but also creating a working partnership with another colleague with an alternative experience of teaching degree level.'*

Organisational skills, persistence and determination in keeping the collaborative partnerships moving towards outcomes is both exciting and frustrating but ultimately satisfying.

### **Key words**

Environment, values, access, shared visions, subject, dedication, opportunities, commitment, holistic, support, stress, struggling, communication, comfortable,

workload, disappointed, friendly, enjoyable, inclusive, encouraging, informative, belonging, participation

## **8. Recommendations**

- a. Learn from pre-entry approaches including the interview process
- b. Use students as part of interview and visits to feeder institutions
- c. Ensure communication with students is clear and available through a range of channels
- d. Develop induction approaches that ensure parity for all students and consider diverse student needs
- e. Do not assume student independence is as high as anticipated
- f. Highlight the key role of student support

### **Contact point/name for further information**

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### **ADM-HEA URL link to resources**

<http://www.adm.heacademy.ac.uk/projects/adm-hea-projects/the-3Es-project-student-expectations-experiences-and-encounters-with-he>

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