This working paper sets out the context and design of the Hefce-funded TLRP project Degrees of Success: Research on the Transition from Vocational Education and Training to Higher Education. It discusses in some detail the design of one of the three parts of the project; this part is concerned with the learning experience of students with different backgrounds. The focus of the paper is the development and description of research tools used in this part of the project; it also briefly outlines issues concerning access, the timing of the fieldwork and ethical considerations. The paper is the first in a series of working papers on the work of Degrees of Success.

The context

The current debate on widening participation in HE (Higher Education) in relation to VET (Vocational Education and Training), needs to consider two issues. First, educational participation beyond the compulsory school age has increased in the UK since 1945, with a massive increase in participation in full-time provision between 1985 and 1994. The increase can partly be attributed to the increased availability of vocationally-oriented qualifications aimed at 16-year olds. Such expansion was seen as a decisive pre-condition for widening participation in HE (see for instance Education and Employment Committee, 2001, p. 33 and HEFCE, 2000). However, international studies have shown that this connection is not necessarily valid. For instance, the empirical study of 13 countries by Blossfeld and Shavit (1991) comprehensively negates the thesis which assumes ‘that educational expansion results in greater equality of educational opportunity’ (p. 29). In terms of access to HE, despite the overall expansion of the sector, the incremental growth in student numbers remains greatest for middle class students holding traditional GCE A-level qualifications (Ball, 2003; cf. also Sutton Trust, 2005).

The second issue is that the increase in participation in post-compulsory education in recent decades suggests that the expansionist aims have been achieved in secondary education to a certain degree, partly by a substantial increase in participation in vocationally-oriented programmes. However, an US study of educational participation concludes that: ‘vocational education at the secondary level (…) does inhibit students’ chances of continuing on to college and as such, it probably inhibits their chances of reaching the professions and most prestigious occupations.’ (Arum and Shavit, 1993, p. 20) Furthermore, investigations into the educational value of many of these qualifications in terms of their currency for further progression have concluded that they de facto only offer a ‘mirage of wider opportunities’ (Pugsley, 2004, p. 28). Instead, each wave
of new vocationally-oriented qualifications has contributed to the overall tendency toward educational credentialism.

Nonetheless, within current UK policy a key lever for raising the perceived value of VQs (Vocational Qualifications) is to ensure that they provide a means for progressing into, and providing a solid basis for study in HE (Higher Education). Typically this policy challenge is framed in terms of the acceptability of VQs to Higher Education with the social perception of VQs by young people and their families being based, in part, on the signals that emanate from the HE sector (Pugsley, 2004). However, little is known about the transition into, and progression within, HE of those holding Level 3 VQs. Therefore it seems timely to investigate whether growing participation in VET has resulted in increasing participation of people with a vocational background in HE in the UK and whether this has, in turn, contributed to widening participation in terms of people from socio-economic backgrounds and/or regions that had tended not to take part in HE before. Existing studies in this area (cf. for instance, Gokulsing, Ainley et al., 1996; Bynner and Roberts, 1991; Ainley, 1999) are too old to provide an overview of the current situation.

The project

In this context, the Degrees of Success project aims to investigate the ways in which people with Vocational Qualifications make the transition to Higher Education. The project consists of three interlinked parts, summarised in the diagram below. These are intended to be interlocking rather than stand-alone elements. At the heart of the research design are a set of User Forums consisting of practitioners from both the HE and VET communities who by interacting with the products of the research will provide the feedback mechanisms shown in the diagram.
Part 1 analyses large-scale datasets in order to both map the transitional terrain between VET provision and HE and to understand the kinds of factors that have an impact on the conditional probability of transition.

In order to follow up issues that cannot be resolved by secondary data analysis alone, Part 2 compares and contrasts the background of students with vocationally and more academically-oriented entry qualifications, and their respective experiences of the learning environments provided by HEIs. One issue that can be investigated in this part of the work is the phenomenon of non-linear learning careers (for instance, learners going back to higher or vocational education after a period of work). This phenomenon is not covered in the previous figure which only represents an ideal-typical framework for actual learning careers.

Apart from developing a better understanding of transitions from VET to HE, the aim of Degrees of Success is also to engage with educational decision-makers and practitioners in order to translate the results of the quantitative and qualitative investigation into admissions, teaching and learning practice. Therefore, a continuous discourse with the VET and HE communities has been initiated, in Part 3, in order to discuss the findings of the first two parts of the study and to make them relevant in practice. Furthermore, the discussions ensuing from Part 3 of the project are used to amend and further develop the investigations in the first two parts of the research design.

This working paper sets out the initial stages of the work in Part 2 of Degrees of Success. Separate working papers outline the work and findings of the other parts of the project.

Researching the learning experience of students with different backgrounds: research design

The part of the research design described in this working paper compares and contrasts the background of students with vocationally and more academically-oriented entry qualifications. In particular their respective experiences of the learning environments provided by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are investigated. The following questions represent the starting point for this investigation:

1. What are the reasons for the success or otherwise of HE students with a vocational background? To what extent can these reasons be linked to the teaching practices, curricula and learning environments students experience?
2. To what extent are students with vocational qualifications prepared for studies in HE? What mechanisms are in place to remedy any lack of preparation?

3. How far are HE lecturers aware of, and able to respond to, the particular experiences and needs of students with vocational backgrounds?

Section 1: selecting and negotiating access to courses and institutions

The data analysed in the first part of the systemic component of the research design was used to identify five HEIs that offer courses in the broad subject areas of business studies, nursing and IT. The rationale for choosing these three subject areas included the following:

- **Sufficient enrolment of students with a vocational background**
  
  As we are interested in differences between different student groups it was important to identify subjects with a considerable proportion of students with a vocational background. This does not mean that the proportion cannot vary between programmes and institutions. For instance, at most institutions nursing courses have a higher proportion of students with a vocational background than IT and business programmes.

- **Appropriate mix of student body in terms of gender**
  
  We started with the assumption that nursing is mainly studied by female students, IT predominantly by male students and business studies by a fair mixture of students. This assumption was broadly confirmed in a preliminary analysis of UCAS application data.

- **Relative size and availability of subject groups**
  
  As we were looking for the same three subjects at five institutions we looked for subjects that are offered by most HEIs. It was also important to select subjects with a sufficient number of first year student cohorts (at least 30 students).

The following interlinked criteria guided the selection of the five HEIs:

- **Proportion of students with vocational background enrolled**
  
  We chose a number of institutions with high ‘vocational enrolment’ and contrast them with institutions with a low share of students with a vocational background.

- **Regional diversity**
  
  In order to contrast the situation in England with divergent educational frameworks in the UK we chose three English HEIs and two Scottish ones.

- **Type of institution**
  
  We included two Further Education (FE) Colleges with HE programmes within the research design in order to contrast students’ experience in traditional university settings with experience in non-traditional settings (cf. Bird & Crawley, 1994).
The application of these criteria resulted in a shortlist of around ten institutions which offered similar courses in the three subject areas in which we were interested. We then invited five institutions from the shortlist, which seemed to provide us with the best institutional mix according to our criteria, to take part in the project. As each of the five institutions we contacted first agreed to participate in the study, it was not necessary to contact the other institutions.

Our first contact was by email with the Deans or Heads of Schools or Departments who had responsibility for the three subjects. Once they had been given some initial information, by email or in a follow up telephone call, about what would be involved in participating in the project, (how many interviews and questionnaires, how much time would be required, ethical considerations, what they would gain from participating, etc.) we asked them to nominate a contact for each subject or course who would liaise with the research team and send back an informed consent form (see paragraph below about ethics approval procedures).

All the Institutions/Colleges/Schools/Departments contacted were interested in participating in the project because they had some awareness of issues in widening participation and also, in Scotland, because of particular policy contexts. In some cases the Heads/Deans and/or the contact were also interested because they would be invited to join the User Forums which are an integral part of the project (Part 3). Rather surprisingly there was very little non-interest, on the part of the academic staff contacted, in participating, or anxiety about what the research project intends to find. This might be because the transition VET to HE is perceived as a federating issue. In only one case has any course pulled out, and that is because their group of students are the focus of several research questions and they regretfully decided that they would not subject their students to a further study after all.

We obtained ethics approval for this research project from the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) and we are working under the British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines (BERA, 2004). This means that the information participating institutions, staff and students provide will be confidential, and that their anonymity is guaranteed. Additionally, data management is being carried out in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 (see www.opsi.gov.uk/ACTS/acts1998/19980029.htm). This means, for example, that paper questionnaires completed by students and interview transcripts will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and the only people with access to individual data will be the project researchers. Course tutors will not have access to any individual responses provided by students taking part in the study and will be shown the results in summary form only. Participation in the study was on an entirely voluntary basis meaning that participants are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Participants were asked to consent to take part
in the *Degrees of Success* study (see Appendix 1 for an example of an informed consent letter).

**Section 2: methods of investigation and timing of fieldwork**

In the selected institutions, the entire intake of students in the three subject areas for the 2006/07 academic year is being followed through their first year of studies, providing a longitudinal element in the overall design. This will be backed up by the use of secondary data analysis for these institutions, to examine overall patterns in participation, progression and success rates over time. Course documentation will be collected, and registry data used, to measure the relative value-added for those with vocationally and academically oriented qualifications.

The investigation of students' learning experiences includes the following measures:

1. Student questionnaires
2. Interviews with students
3. Interviews with lecturers
4. Interviews with admissions staff
5. Document and added value analysis.

Timing of the project is related to the academic year and also to a temporal time line in terms of students having experienced HE to a greater or lesser degree i.e. to a lesser degree for the first part of the study and to a greater degree for the second part of the study. The aim was therefore to administer one set of student questionnaires at the beginning, and a further set towards the end, of the academic year. Due to the differences in the term structure of the academic year in different institutions (and sometimes differences between programmes within the same institution) the first set of questionnaires was administered between October 2006 and January 2007 and the second set between April and May 2007. Whilst most interviews were conducted in concentrated two-day visits to the five institutions in April and May 2007, in some cases face-to-face interviews were not possible because, for instance, no time could be arranged to meet students when exam preparations dominated students’ life and assessment dominated staff schedules. Email and telephone interviews are to be carried out as an alternative once the exams have passed.

**Section 3: Questionnaire development**

Two questionnaire instruments are being used in this study in order to gather a range of data on:
- the different educational and social backgrounds of students
- the expectations with which students start their studies
- the different perceptions of their new learning environment
- the perceived degree to which students feel prepared for their course by their previous educational pathway
- the challenges encountered in the first year of studies
- the students’ perceptions of the teaching modes and of learning support experienced.

The data will be analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. A particular focus for the analysis of the questionnaire data are the differences between students with vocational and academic backgrounds and the differences in students’ perceptions of different types of institutions.

**Transition to Higher Education questionnaire**

The first instrument in our study is an exploratory questionnaire regarding student transition into Higher Education. It was administered during a core lecture or in large seminar groups by a project researcher, to all 1st year students on the three courses (a possible 1502 (657 business, 380 IT and 465 nursing) students) towards the beginning of their HE experience (October 2006-January 2007), and in some cases also to third or final year students (a possible 235 (55 business and 180 IT) students). The face-to-face approach was taken to improve return rates\(^1\), and in some cases a poor return has been followed up with an email version.

In this first questionnaire we had two aims. First of all, to gather some base-line data about the population (gender, socio-economic background, educational background, etc) that will complement the data from UCAS and HESA which is being gathered in the quantitative part of the project. Secondly, to investigate some particular issues, which would be followed up in the interviews which were to be carried out over the course of the 2006-07 academic year with students and staff at each of the institutions, such as the students’ reasons for choosing to study at their current HEI. Additionally the questionnaire data aimed to enable us to pre-select interesting cases to interview for that part of the project.

Since the 1970s various types of inventories and questionnaires have been developed to measure students’ approaches to studying (see overview provided by Richardson, 2000). Whilst the first year experience alone has been the subject of many studies (see Harvey, Drew et al., 2006 for a review of the literature), many research projects have used questionnaires, such as the Approaches to Studying Inventory, the Course Experience Questionnaire, the Learning and

\(^1\) Return rates are HEI 1: 74%, HEI 2: 46%, HEI 3: 67%, HEI 4: 68% and HEI 5: 69%, Business: 50% IT: 66% and Nursing: 81%.
Studying Questionnaire among others, as a way of gathering data from student populations and as the basis for more qualitative research. In a recent review conducted for the Higher Education Academy, inventory-based studies into students’ approaches to learning, learning styles and their evaluations of teaching effectiveness were identified as dominant paradigm in research on learning in Higher Education (Ertl, Hayward et al., 2007). This review concludes that such studies provide little insight into the learning experience of students, but rather about students themselves, their skills, characteristics and learning preferences. However, the review also demonstrates that these studies are not only widely-read and influential in the field, but are also perceived as a good basis for improving teaching and, in the longer term, the quality of the student experience. For example, Trigwell and Ashwin (Trigwell, 2005; Trigwell, 2006; Trigwell and Ashwin, 2003) have carried out research on undergraduate learning at the University of Oxford which used inventory based approaches combined with qualitative research, whilst Trigwell and Dunbar-Goddet (2005) used similar mixed methods to investigate the postgraduate experience.

In order to make it possible to reflect on our investigation of students in the light of the vast amount of literature on student approaches to learning, we decided to include sets of items developed in two inventory-based studies. In the first questionnaire we included a set of items developed for the Learning and Studying Questionnaire (see http://www.tla.ed.ac.uk/etl/questionnaires/LSQ.pdf) used by the Enhancing Teaching and Learning Environments (ETL) project. This project aimed ‘[…] to explore ways of strengthening the teaching-learning environments experienced by students taking degree-level courses’ (ETL 2001, p. 1), an aim which is close to one of our overarching aims. ETL produced a substantial amount of data (for instance it conducted a questionnaire survey which resulted in around 6500 student questionnaires) which will allow us to map the result from our smaller scale study against a larger sample. Further, the ETL questionnaire we draw on was also adapted for use by the ‘From Further Education to Higher Education’ project also based at the University of Edinburgh which is looking at the students’ experiences at both College and University and finding out about wider issues affecting students from non-traditional backgrounds (Christie, Cree, Hounsell, McCune, & Tett, 2006). This is one of the very few pieces of research that has specifically looked at HE students with a vocational background and being able to discuss our data in the light of the findings of this project will provide us with a better and broader understanding of issues involved in the transition of vocational students to HE. In our first questionnaire we used nine items developed for the ETL questionnaire which aimed to investigate the main reasons of students for going to Higher Education:

- **Item 20a.** I want to develop knowledge and skills I can use in a career
- **Item 20b.** I hope the things I learn will help me to develop as a person and broaden my horizons
- **Item 20c.** I’m focused on the opportunities here for an active social life and/or sport
- **Item 20d.** I hope the whole experience here will make me more independent and self-confident
Item 20e. I’m mainly here because it seemed the natural thing: I’d done well academically in the past
Item 20f. I want to learn things which might let me help people, and/or make a difference in the world
Item 20g. I want to study the subject in depth by taking interesting and stimulating courses
Item 20h. I mainly need the qualification to enable me to get a good job when I finish
Item 20i. I want an opportunity to prove to myself or to other people what I can do

These items will allow us to determine whether students are intrinsically motivated (by the subject itself, by the prospect of personal development, etc.) or whether they come to HE for other reasons, such as perceived better career opportunities or the prospect of an exciting social life as a student. Through the analysis of our data we hope to find out whether there are significant differences in motivation between students with an academic and a vocational background.

We also looked at the questionnaires, such as the UCAS form, used to build the administrative databases being used in the quantitative part of the project, as another starting point to developing our first instrument. We included several items from the UCAS form so that we would be able to compare our data with the data from the large datasets in the quantitative part of the project, mainly descriptive items such as gender, socio-economic status, etc. Examples of baseline items we included are:

**Item 2. Status:**
- full-time student
- part-time student

**Item 3. Year of Study:**
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- more than 4

**Item 4. Age:**
- under 18
- 18-21
- 22-25
- 26-30
- over 30

**Item 5. Gender:**
- male
- female

As well as creating, modifying and using questionnaire items used in other research projects and the UCAS form, we consulted with students and colleagues whilst drafting the first questionnaire instrument, in order to develop some open-ended questions based on issues that they identified or that have been identified in other projects and in the literature. These included questions about expectations of the course and institution, state of preparedness for HE study, differences between study contexts, etc. The overarching aim of these open questions was to develop an understanding of the underlying motivations and rationales that guide students’ transition into Higher Education. The open questions included the following:

**Item 12a. Please indicate, on a scale of 1 to 5, how prepared you feel for your current course:**
- 1 unprepared
- 2 partly prepared
- 3 partly prepared
- 4 well-prepared

**Item 12b. Please tell us what makes you feel prepared**
Item 12c. Please tell us what makes you feel unprepared

Item 15a. Please tell us what expectations you have of your new course
Item 15b. Please indicate, on a scale of 1 to 5, how far those expectations have been met to date:

□ 1 not met          □ 2          □ 3 partly met          □ 4          □ 5 completely met

Item 19. Please tell us how you think learning in Higher Education will differ from your previous learning experiences (e.g. school, college, etc)

We asked a number of colleagues and students to make suggestions about how to improve the draft questionnaire items that we piloted with them and then decided which changes we would make after this consultation process.

For example, having spoken to students who had a vocational background, we reworded some of the questions and also separated some questions into two i.e. we ask about expectations of the course and the institution separately (items 15 and 18), we ask about the students’ state of preparedness for HE study but also their state of ‘unpreparedness’ (items 12b and c), and we reworded the questions about differences between study contexts i.e. we now ask what is enjoyable or difficult about the course (items 13 and 14) and how it is different to previous experiences (item 19), rather than ‘Could you please tell us what expectations you have of your new learning environment’.

In line with the UCAS application form, the questionnaire contained a question regarding the occupation of the students’ parents (item 21). This gives information on the family background of students and also ensures that our data is compatible with the relevant UCAS datasets.

Expectations of Higher Education questionnaire
The second instrument in our study is a questionnaire regarding student experience of Higher Education, which has been administered to all 1st year students on the three courses in the five HEIs towards the end of their HE experience (April-May 2007) and again in some cases, also to third or final year students. The second instrument was administered during a core lecture or in large seminar groups by our project contacts.

In this second questionnaire we had the following aims:

- chart the experience and progress of students in the first year of studies
- determine in how far the expectations regarding studying in HE have been fulfilled

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2 Responses from the second questionnaire can be linked to those on the first one through the student numbers which were asked for in both instruments as a linking variable.
• trace the main challenges students are facing and the ways they find to overcome them
• develop an understanding of the students’ perception of their learning processes and their learning environment
• identify changes in the perception of students’ experiences between the beginning and towards the end of the first year of studies.

The overarching aim was again to gauge in how far there are differences in perceptions, expectations and experiences between students with a vocational background and students who come to HE with mainly academic qualifications.

Similar to our strategy with the first questionnaire we also aimed with the second questionnaire to produce data that can be discussed in the context of the findings of other research projects which used student questionnaires to evaluate student learning and learning experience. For investigating students’ perceptions of their learning environment we included a series of items used in the National Student Survey (NSS). The NSS was established in the United Kingdom in 2005 following the recommendations made by a Task Group on revising the quality assurance framework in 2002. The survey, described by HEFCE as an ‘essential element of the revised quality assurance framework for higher education’, is intended to inform the public and especially prospective students in choosing Higher Education Institutions (HEFCE, 2007).

The NSS has been criticised for a number of reasons. For instance, Prosser (2005) suggested that student surveys of this nature should not be used to make comparisons between institutions. Similarly, Marsh, Rowe et al. (2002) criticised the use of the NSS and similar surveys for identifying benchmarks across Higher Education Institutions. They argue that, in general, quality variation across universities is not significant, and therefore student evaluation surveys cannot provide a useful basis for benchmarking universities. The authors assert that the best unit of analysis for student evaluation is the teacher or the class (see Ertl, Hayward et al., 2007).

This is the unit of analysis at which we are using the data. The items drawn from the NSS are clearly not used to make any comparisons between institutions but rather to systematically describe the students’ perception of certain elements of their learning environment, such as teaching, assessment, workload, organisation of the course, and support and advice. The NSS items we included in the second questionnaire are the following:

Item 10a. assessments have tested what we were supposed to learn
Item 10b. staff have made the subject interesting
Item 10c. any changes in the course or teaching have always been communicated effectively
Item 10d. the timetable works efficiently as far as my activities are concerned
Item 10e. the course is well organised and is running smoothly
Item 10f. staff are good at explaining things
Item 10g. teaching staff have made an effort to understand our difficulties
Item 10h. the workload is too heavy
Item 10i. the criteria used in marking have been clear in advance
Item 10j. I have had enough time to understand what I have to learn
Item 10k. the background workload suggested has been unrealistic
Item 10l. deadlines in the course are well spread out
Item 10m. the course is intellectually stimulating
Item 10n. good advice was available when I needed to make choices in my studies
Item 10o. I have received sufficient advice and support with my studies
Item 10p. I have been able to contact staff when I needed to
Item 10q. assessment arrangements and marking have been fair
Item 10r. staff are enthusiastic about what they are teaching

These standardised items are followed up, in our questionnaire, by open-ended questions on particular elements of the students’ learning environment:

Item 11. Please write here any comments you would like to make about
a. the teaching and assessment on your course
b. the workload on your course
c. the organisation and management of your course
d. the support and advice on your course

Further, the second questionnaire included another set of items drawn from the ETL project’s Learning and Studying Questionnaire (LSQ). These items aimed to develop an understanding of how students engage with their learning environment, how they organise their learning processes, and what they aim for in their learning. As described in the previous section, we hope that the connection to the ETL project will allow us to interpret our data in the context of a broader data base. LSQ items we used in our second questionnaire include:

Item 13a. I usually set out to understand for myself the meaning of what we have to learn
Item 13b. I organise my study time carefully to make the best use of it
Item 13f. I’m just going through the motions of studying without seeing where I’m going.
Item 13i. In making sense of new ideas, I often relate them to practical or real-life contexts

Another structured question in our second questionnaire picks up on the expectations of HE studies that the students mentioned in the first questionnaire. The most frequently mentioned expectations were:

- building confidence
- gaining skills for the workplace
- studying in HE being different from school/college
- meeting with people and making friends
- learning new and interesting things.

In the second questionnaire students are asked to decide whether they shared each of these expectations, or had another expectation which they were asked to describe, and whether each of those expectations has been fulfilled (items 15a-a-f and 15b a-f).

As with the first instrument, we consulted with colleagues during the development of the second instrument. We also consulted with practitioners, through the User Forums, whilst drafting the second questionnaire and developed some open-ended questions based on issues that they identified, such as the availability and use of support and guidance, for instance:

*Item 8. What have you found most valuable about your course so far?*

*Item 9a. What have you found most difficult about your course so far?*
  *Item 9b. Please give an example of a difficulty you faced in your course this year and how you managed to overcome it*
  *Item 9c. What support, if any, did you get from the university to overcome this difficulty*
  *Item 9d. Would support have been available if you had asked for it?*

  yes  no  don’t know

**Section 4: Preparing and conducting interviews**

This part of the Degrees of Success project combines quantitative and qualitative research methods. There is a growing body of literature on mixed methods approaches in the social sciences that provide a convincing pragmatic, as well as conceptual, argument for combining different research methods in order to produce robust, comprehensive and relevant research findings (see for instance Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998; Bryman, 2006; Axinn and Pearce, 2006).

More specifically, the review of the research in student learning experience in HE leads to the conclusion that the findings of many studies are not convincing, as they only analyse one source of data, often because the methodological framework of the research is too narrow to capture the mediated and contextualised nature of learning and therefore neglects social and organisational aspects of learning. This is particularly often the case in inventory-based studies which often replicate previous research, fail to recognise the limitations of one-dimensional data derived from ‘student tick-boxing’ exercises, and therefore do not contribute to a deeper understanding of student learning in HE (Ertl, Hayward et al., 2007). However, there are studies that systematically combine different research approaches and provide deeper insights into how students in HE conceptualise their situation and their ways of acting in their learning environment (see, for example, Trigwell and Ashwin, 2003; Trigwell & Dunbar-Goddet, 2005).
Richardson (1996, pp 167f.) identifies three ways in which quantitative and qualitative methods can be usefully combined: **triangulation** (checking findings developed from different research methods against each other), **facilitation** (one approach acts as a source for hypotheses or assumptions which are then followed up in the design of other research methods, or tested using other research methods), and **complementarity** (different approaches provide different sorts of information that facilitate the analysis of data). In our project the preliminary analysis of administrative datasets has certainly **facilitated** the selection of HEIs and subject areas for the in-depth investigations of the second part of the project and to a certain extent the findings from the two parts will be **triangulated** against each other.

Within **Part 2**, the questionnaires are regarded as a means to produce relevant interview questions for students and lecturers. The interviews were primarily used to gain a deeper understanding of the motivations of different student groups for entering Higher Education, their rationale for choosing a subject and an institution (see Cohen and Manion, 1994, p. 273). At the same time, the first questionnaire was used to identify ‘interesting cases’, i.e. students that came into HE with a vocational background and/or demonstrate a certain degree of reflectiveness regarding their educational pathway. By interviewing students as well as lecturers and admissions staff, **complementary** data on the transition into, and experience of, different students in Higher Education is produced. As outlined earlier, the research methods and findings developed in **Parts 1 and 2** of the project are **triangulated** in User Forum discussions with experts and practitioners in the field in **Part 3**.

**Interviews with students**
The data from the questionnaires has been supplemented by semi-structured individual interviews with a small number of students (usually 3-5) in each programme undertaken towards the end of the first year of study. In some cases pair or group interviews were also carried out. These interviews aimed to provide more detailed insights into:

- the educational and social backgrounds of students
- the motives of students in applying to study in HE
- the criteria for selecting a specific subject and a specific institution
- the coherence/discrepancy between their previous and current learning experiences
- the personal contexts in which they study
- the criteria which underlie the perceptions of their new learning environments.
While the focus of the interviews is on the experience and perceptions of students who came to their course via the vocational qualification route, the selection of interviewees also ensured that differences between students with vocational and academic backgrounds can be identified.

The interview schedule used for these interviews is structured in five broad areas: general information about the student, decision-making processes and expectations, perceptions of the learning environment, commitments outside HE and expectations for the future. (See Appendix 2 for the student interview schedule.)

**Interviews with lecturers**

In each course of study of our investigation, one or two lecturers teaching on the course have been interviewed individually or in pairs. (See Appendix 3 for the lecturer interview schedule). In these interviews, lecturers were asked about the following aspects of their teaching:

- awareness of differences in students’ educational experiences prior to the start of the course
- responsiveness to students’ prior experience and the factors that constrain and support their capacity to respond
- perception of different learning patterns and responses to differences
- assessment of the potential achievement of students with a vocationally-oriented qualifications as opposed to students with academically-oriented qualifications.

For the analysis of interviews with lecturers the differences between different types of institutions are particularly important.

**Interviews with admissions staff**

Finally a more limited number of interviews (1-2 per institution) have been conducted with those responsible for admissions to each of the courses, to explore issues affecting the probability of transition from VET programmes into the HE context. (See Appendix 4 for the admissions staff interview schedule). These interviews aimed to help to explain how admissions procedures are conducted, which criteria are used for selecting students and which information policy is applied at the pre-application stage.

All the interviews conducted were semi-structured, allowing flexibility to follow up the particular insights and areas of expertise of responsibility of interviewees. The analysis of all three sets of interview data described above will be the basis for a separate working paper.

**Section 5: Concluding comments**

Analyses of the questionnaire data gathered in Part 2 of the project will be reported in a forthcoming working paper. We can however report here that 1106
‘Transitions to Higher Education’ questionnaires were collected at the beginning of the academic year. Of those 1106, 359 were from business students, 369 were from computing students and 377 were from nursing students. Of the 1106 responses, 354 were from HEI 1 students (155 nursing, 108 business, 91 IT), 205 were from HEI 2 students (59 nursing, 73 business, 73 IT), 288 were from HEI 3 students (132 business, 156 IT), 61 were from HEI 4 students (34 nursing, 15 business, 12 IT) and finally 197 were from HEI 5 students (129 nursing, 31 business, 37 IT).

The data is currently being inputted for the second ‘Expectations of Higher Education’ questionnaire.

Analyses of the interview data will be reported in the forthcoming working paper mentioned above as the data will illuminate the quantitative questionnaire data. We can however report here that, to date, 66 interviews have been carried out with 78 people (some of the interviews were in pairs or groups). 18 people have been interviewed at HEI 1 (7 students, 7 lecturers and 4 admissions staff), 12 people have been interviewed at HEI 2 (5 students, 6 lecturers and 1 admissions staff), 12 people have been interviewed at HEI 3 (7 students, 4 lecturers and 1 admissions staff), 19 people have been interviewed at HEI 4 (14 students, 5 lecturers and 2 admissions staff), and finally 18 people have been interviewed at HEI 5 (7 students, 7 lecturers and 4 admissions staff).
References


BERA. (2004). Revised ethical guidelines for educational research. from [www.bera.ac.uk/publications/pdfs/ETHICA1.PDF](http://www.bera.ac.uk/publications/pdfs/ETHICA1.PDF)


Appendix 1 Sample Student consent letter

January 2007

Dear Student,

We are writing to ask for your consent to take part in the ‘Degrees of success: the transition between VET and HE’ project, based at the University of Oxford.

We are asking all the students enrolled on a 2006/07 business, nursing or computing course at your institution to take part in the study. As part of the research, we will be administering two questionnaires, the first towards the beginning of the academic year and the second towards the end of the academic year, to all the students. During the course of the academic year 2006/07 we will also interview: i) a small number of students on the course about their experience and perceptions of the course; ii) two or three lecturers about their teaching on the course; and iii) one or two members of admissions staff about transition into HE.

We have received ethics approval for this research from the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) and we are working under the British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines. The information you provide will be confidential, and your anonymity is guaranteed. Data management will be carried out in accordance with the Data Protection Act. Paper questionnaires completed by students will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. The only people with access to individual data will be the project researchers. Your course tutors will not have access to any individual responses provided by students taking part in the study and will be shown the results in summary form only. Individual questionnaires will be held until the end of the project (March 2008), after which they will be shredded.

Participation in the study is entirely voluntary and you would be free to withdraw from the study at any time. If you do decide to withdraw, we would be grateful if you could let us know by contacting Harriet, either by telephone (01865 274010) or by email (harriet.dunbar-goddet@edstud.ox.ac.uk).

If you are happy to take part in the Degrees of Success study, we would be grateful if you could sign and date the consent slip below and return it with your completed questionnaire. If you would like to ask any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact us, either by email or by telephone.

Kind regards

Harriet Dunbar-Goddet
Hubert Ertl
Geoff Hayward
Michael Hoelscher
Degrees of success project team
University of Oxford Department of Educational Studies
Tel: (01865) 274010
Email: harriet.dunbar-goddet@edstud.ox.ac.uk

I consent to take part in the Degrees of Success study, and declare that:

- I have read and understood the consent letter;
- I understand that I have the opportunity to ask follow up questions about the study;
- I understand that participation in the study is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time;
- I understand that the project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.

Name (please print):
Signature:
Date:
Appendix 2 Student Interview Schedule

1) About the student
   - Can you tell me a little bit about yourself, for example can you describe the qualifications you obtained before coming into Higher Education?
   - Which institutions did you attend, what subjects did you study?
   - What kind of work-based training have you undertaken or have you done any work experience?
   - Have you already had a job, what was it, does it relate to your current studies, why or why not?

2) Decision-making processes and expectations
   - Why did you choose to go into Higher Education?
   - What do you expect to get from the experience of Higher Education?
   - How and why did you choose the course and the institution?
   - Would you choose to do this course at this institution if you had the choice to make all over again? Who do you think this course is aimed at?
   - Would you recommend this course and/or institution to other students, why or why not?

3) Perceptions of the learning environment
   - What have you most enjoyed/what have you found most difficult about your course so far?
   - How does this learning environment compare to previous learning and work environments (school, college, company, etc)?
   - Have you encountered any difficulties and what systems are in place to support you?
   - Have those difficulties been resolved, why or why not?

4) Commitments
   - What demands are there on your time other than the course (i.e. work, family responsibilities, extra-curricular activities)?
   - How much time do they take up?
   - Is this a help or a hindrance?
   - How are you financing your studies, in how far do financial issues impact on you studies?

5) The future
   - Looking to the future, what makes you feel prepared/what makes you feel unprepared for your second year?
   - And further in the future, do you know what you want to do after this course?
   - How does this course fit in with that plan?
Appendix 3 Lecturer Interview Schedule

1) About the students
   - Can you tell me a little bit about the kind of students that come to study this course?
   - Where do you recruit your students from? Are you involved in the recruitment process?
   - What subjects have your students studied at school or college? What qualifications do they hold?
   - To what extent have your students undertaken any work-based training, how many of your students have had work experience?
   - Are you aware of students who have already had a job that relates to their studies?
   - How many of your students have demands on their time other than the course, and what kinds of demands are they? (prompt: paid work, family responsibilities, extra-curricular activities)?

2) Distinctions between students with different backgrounds
   - Who do you think this course is aimed at? What proportion of students on your course have a vocational background?
   - In your experience, do you think students with a vocational background have different expectations of Higher Education? Is there a difference between the students with a vocational background and the other students in terms of expectations?
   - To what extent do students with a vocational background have different skills? (prompt: do they have a different knowledge base? Do they find it difficult to do some things that are asked of them? Do they have different attitudes to studying? Do they react to certain tasks in different ways?) How do you respond to that? (prompt: teaching, assessment, pastoral care.)
   - How else are students with a vocational background different? Are you responding to these differences in any way (prompt: reactively, proactively)

3) Teaching and the learning environment
   - What do students most enjoy/find most difficult about your course?
   - How do you make your teaching relevant to the student population?
   - If students encounter any difficulties what systems are in place to support them?
   - Do students with a vocational background produce different outcomes?
   - Is there any support in place to help students make the transition to the labour market?
Appendix 4 Admissions Staff Interview Schedule

1) About the students
   - Can you tell me a little bit about the kind of students that come to study at this institution? Where do you recruit your students from? How does the recruitment process work?
   - How much account is taken of the subjects the students have studied or the qualifications they hold? Who do you think this institution aims to attract? Are you aware of there being students with a vocational background coming to this institution?
   - What is the probability of transition from vocational programmes into HE? How many people with vocational qualifications apply? How successful are they?
   - What are the most common vocational qualifications with which people apply? What do you do if somebody applies with a qualification you don’t recognise? How are minimum entry requirements applied? (prompt: use of/confidence in tariff points).

2) Distinctions between students with different backgrounds
   - Do you think students with a vocational background have different expectations of Higher Education?
   - Do students with a vocational background have different skills? Do they have a different knowledge base?

3) Teaching and the learning environment
   - What sort of support is available to make the transition into Higher Education easier?
   - If students encounter any difficulties what systems are in place to support them?