

Making the Transition from College to University

The Experiences of HN Students

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Executive Summary

1. This final report draws on findings from the fieldwork undertaken in a qualitative study exploring the theme of transition from college to university of a sample of students who entered Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) to study for a degree in the subject areas of Social Sciences, Business/ Management Technology and Enterprise, Computing and Engineering after completing their Higher National Certificates (HNCs) or Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) in college.
2. Most of the respondents in this study reported that they found their HNC/Ds a useful preparation for degree level study, and for many this has provided a route into university which would not otherwise have been available.
3. It was also noted that for the majority of students who progress to degree studies from higher nationals (HNs) this can be seen as a 'second chance' route which is often complex and non-linear, and students often initially lack confidence. This creates challenges for the staff in the colleges who are supporting them in their learning journeys. This helps explain some of the distinctive features of the learning and teaching cultures found in colleges, in which there is a greater emphasis on student support, when compared with universities.
4. A number of issues have emerged from the study which, if addressed, could improve the preparation of students for degree level study, and their successful transition into university.
5. **Ensuring students have the information for informed decision-making**

The importance of ensuring that HN students have access to the information which they need to make properly informed choices about the most appropriate progression routes emerged from our interviews. While college staff can have an important role in providing this type of information for students, it is not clear that they always have accurate and up-to-date

information about the best options. Visits by university staff and former HN students were commented on as useful sources of information, and the value of partnership working between staff in colleges and universities was emphasized.

6. **Facilitating successful transition from college to university**

It is important to recognize that many students find challenging the transition from the relatively small scale and supportive environment of the college to the much larger scale and more formal and impersonal environment of the university. In particular direct entrants (DEs) into four year honours programmes, where they are joining student groups who have been on these programmes since Level 1, can find this particularly challenging. While 2+2 programmes can provide a more supportive environment for students, it is important that the needs associated with transition and integration into the life of the university are recognized, and appropriate forms of induction, and other

forms of support are provided for all students.

7. **Preparing students for successful degree level study**

HN students are a more heterogeneous group than the general university undergraduate population. There is a wider age range, many lack the standard university entrance qualifications, and for many this is a 'second chance' route into degree level study. As a result college staff have placed considerable emphasis on providing supportive environments to enable students to gain confidence as successful learners. While recognizing the value and importance of this approach, there are dangers that students are not sufficiently encouraged to develop the learning styles for successful study as degree level students. Students emphasized the need to be encouraged to be more independent learners, to develop capacities for critical thinking and analysis, and for there to be a more rigorous approach to assessment in their HN programmes.

8. Providing appropriate support within the degree programmes

A number of HN students found the transition from college to university initially difficult, and while many seemed to adjust to this new environment, a number of students suggested that more could be done to ease this transition. This was particularly an issue for students entering four year honours programmes, rather than 2+2 programmes. In the four year programmes student peer groups were already well established, and some students found it more difficult to establish a peer support group. There was also lack of recognition among some staff that there were now HN students in the group who had not participated in the first two years of the programme, and whose knowledge base might be different as a result. Ensuring there is appropriate support for these students, particularly during the first few months, could help reduce the dangers of drop-out among students who are finding the transition difficult.

9. Support from student mentors and the Students' Association

While the majority of respondents had heard of student mentors, and some commented on the positive support they provided, many said that they had no contact with them. There was also little evidence that the former HN students were becoming involved with the Students' Association, or accessing any support which it might provide. Consideration should be given on how to increase the level of engagement between HN entrants and these university supports.

10. Ensuring appropriate curriculum matching

In general there was evidence that the curricula of the HNs were providing students with valuable foundations for their degree level studies, and in a number of cases this reflected co-operation between college and university staff to ensure that this fit existed. However in a number of areas gaps were identified, e.g. some former HN students' lack of experience with using the Statistical Package for

the Social Sciences (SPSS) in college, and the value of further collaborative work, building on the work already undertaken within the Greater Glasgow Articulation Partnership (GGAP) project, was recognized.

Recommendations

When considering the implications of the outcomes from this report the following recommendations should be considered.

1. It is important that there is effective co-operation between college and university staff to ensure that students receive accurate and up-to-date information about degree programmes, and the opportunities for articulation. Structures which exist through GGAP, and other hubs, to facilitate co-operation should be built upon to achieve this.
2. Visits by university staff to colleges to inform students are seen by students as being very helpful and programmes of visits should be established. Furthermore, visits by former students returning to college to report on their own experiences are valued and a programme of visits should be established through the student mentoring scheme.
3. The progression database tool developed by GGAP staff is a useful example of the type of resource which can be made available to students, and more resources of this type should be developed.
4. Induction programmes should be provided for all DEs to both four year and 2+2 programmes, and students should be actively encouraged to participate. In addition to generic induction programmes, tailored programmes such as the Maths Summer School or Learning Strategies Week can meet particular needs and contribute to familiarization with the university environment, and should be supported or developed.
5. While recognizing that former HN students may not wish to be singled out as 'special cases', it is important that all tutors are made aware of DE students in their classes, so that they can ensure that they receive any support they need in the early stages of transition.

6. Associate Student Schemes have the potential to provide significant benefits for articulating students, but they must be carefully evaluated to ensure that they are advantageous to all students.
7. While the learning and teaching culture in the colleges should continue to be supportive, it is important that it should encourage learners to be more independent, take more responsibility for their learning, and develop better time management skills.
8. Students expressed a need to move beyond the 'spoon feeding' and 'tick box' approach which many of them said characterized some aspects of learning and teaching within the HNs. Approaches to learning and teaching should encourage the development of skills for critical thinking and analysis.
9. Many students reported that there was little emphasis on referencing in college, and they found themselves at a disadvantage in this respect when they entered university. Greater emphasis should be placed on developing these skills within HN programmes.
10. There was evidence from students that the approaches to assessment lacked the rigour which was expected of them as degree students. College staff also recognized that there were opportunities to utilize more fully the range of assessment methods available to them. Students who are progressing to degree level study should be well prepared for the assessment methods they will encounter.
11. Student mentors can be a valuable source of information, advice and support for students, particularly at the early stages of transition. However, there was only limited evidence of contact with the student mentors. There is a need to consider how student mentors can be used most effectively to establish an appropriate programme of mentor support.
12. There was little evidence that former HN students had much contact with the Students' Association. The Association should be encouraged to consider what level of contact

there is with former HN students, and if more could be done to involve them in this aspect of student life.

13. It will be important to identify students who appear to be losing contact with their programme at the earliest point, establish the reasons for this, and provide support where possible.
14. Despite strenuous efforts, we failed to establish contact with any students who had withdrawn from their degree programme. As a result we have no systematic evidence regarding the factors associated with withdrawal. A further study which focuses on drop-out should be undertaken.
15. A number of projects are already underway to jointly review programmes under the auspices of GGAP, other articulation hubs, and the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). The experience from this work should be built upon to ensure that structures exist to enable college and university staff to co-operate in ensuring that curriculum matching occurs, particularly when relevant programmes are being reviewed in colleges or universities.
16. Where problems are identified, e.g. the absence of an introduction to SPSS in the HNC/D in Social Sciences, it is important that staff are made aware, and there are procedures to ensure that they are addressed. Examples exist within the work of GGAP which can be built upon.
17. Engineering students reported problems with the level of maths on the HN programme, and it is important that students who plan to progress to degree level study have the opportunity to study maths at an appropriate level.

Section One

Introduction

This final report draws on findings from the fieldwork undertaken in a qualitative study exploring the theme of transition from college to university of a sample of students who entered Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) to study for a degree in the subject areas of Social Sciences, Business/Management Technology and Enterprise, Computing and Engineering after completing their Higher National Certificates (HNCs) or Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) in college.

The study has been undertaken by researchers from both the Greater Glasgow Articulation Partnership (GGAP), based in GCU LEAD (Learning Enhancement and Academic Development), and the Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning (CRLL). It was funded through GGAP which is itself funded by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC). The Partnership, one of five articulation hubs in Scotland (plus the Open University) was set up by the SFC in 2008 and has been directed by the Council to create a sustainable infrastructure for

articulation between GCU and its college partners.

The study has explored the following issues: the experiences of students progressing through higher national (HN) study at college and making the move into degree study; their views and experiences of learning, teaching and assessment within both their HN and degree programmes and their experiences as students at university compared to studying for a HNC/D in college.

To complement the data gathered from the student perspective the research has also explored the above themes with relevant staff from both the college and university sectors.

1.1 Background and Context of the Study

1.1.1 Initiatives to support articulation

The context in which this study has been undertaken was initially created by the SFC's initiative to support articulation (SFC, 2007). The SFC's definition of articulation is "*...entry to the second or third year of a university degree course using a Higher National Certificate or a Higher National Diploma (HNC/D) gained in a college as an*

entry qualification” (2007, p10). Since 2007 further policy steers have been introduced both at an institutional and national level to enhance articulation routes within the changing post-compulsory higher education (HE) landscape. GCU’s Outcomes Agreement 2012-13 with the SFC includes a commitment to “...continue to work with colleges, national articulation hub partners and the SFC to promote articulation” (SFC, 2012a, p6). The SFC has outlined further proposals on increasing flexible entry routes, including articulation (SFC, 2012b) and the Scottish Government’s White Paper ‘Putting Learners at the Centre’ has set out legislation that contains further proposals to enhance the learner journey into and through HE in Scotland in order to increase efficiency, flexibility and to widen access to HE (Scottish Government, 2011). These proposals are now included in the Post-16 Education (Scotland) Bill, which is expected to be approved by the Scottish Parliament later in 2013.

Over the last five years GCU, as the lead institution for GGAP, has been delivering a collaborative programme of work with partner colleges, higher education institutions (HEIs), employers

and other partners that will enhance the volume and quality of articulation activity within the Greater Glasgow area. The most recent phase of the partnership (2011-2013) has been focusing on consolidating the considerable work already undertaken on the GGAP infrastructure to deliver increased numbers of articulating students, in line with the steers from both an institutional and national perspective. One of the key areas of work as part of this consolidation phase was to generate evidence to inform and support the articulation development work undertaken through GGAP.

1.1.2 Evidence from previous research

The study also builds on the evidence generated from previous research carried out by researchers in GCU and beyond. The GGAP funded HN Tracking Study investigated the destinations of students who completed HNC/Ds in a sample of colleges in the Greater Glasgow area. It tracked whether this group of students, after completion of their HN programme, entered employment, progressed to degree study or both. Evidence from the research showed that in many subject areas a majority of

HN students were now using their qualifications to progress to degree level study (Ingram and Gallacher, 2011). This progression to degree study was evident in a particular number of HN subject areas, namely Social Sciences, Business and Computing. These subjects along with Engineering, which has particular transition issues, were identified as appropriate programmes to undertake further research that would explore in some depth students' transition experiences as they move from college into university.

The themes that we have explored have built on the issues raised in initial reports on progression, retention and student transition that were also funded by GGAP and conducted by other colleagues within two of GCU's academic Schools. Two research studies were undertaken within the Glasgow School *for* Business and Society (GSBS) and one within the School of Engineering and Built Environment (SEBE).

The Edinburgh, Lothians, Fife and Borders Regional Articulation Hub (ELRAH) also commissioned a study of the experience of students who have made the transition from HNs to degree level study (Howieson and Croxford, 2011).

1.1.3 Informing current policy

The evidence from the HN Tracking Study on the uses being made of HN qualifications has been instrumental in giving rise to the Scottish Qualification Authority's (SQAs) HN Enhancement Pilot Project. Four Qualification Review Teams (QRTs) which include representation from SQA, HEIs and colleges have been tasked with how best to enhance the academic transition between HNs and relevant degrees in the areas of Social Sciences, Business, Computing and Engineering. Preliminary findings from the research have been informing the work of the QRTs.

1.2 Aims of the Study

The main aim of the study was to identify issues which are relevant to students in the transition from HN to degree programmes so that their experience can be enhanced. In this way the study would support the work of the GGAP hub, and the other articulation hubs.

The study aimed primarily to gather data on the experiences of full-time direct entrants (DEs), that is those who entered with full advanced standing to Level 2 with an HNC or Level 3 with an HND as well

as the experiences of part-time students who articulate through their equivalent progression route. However, findings from the HN Tracking Study confirm the picture that has emerged in national data that not all undergraduate students who enter HEIs with an HNC/D receive full credit (Ingram and Gallacher, 2011; National Articulation Database (NAD), 2012). Therefore issues pertinent to those whose HN qualification enabled them to *access* degree level study but who have not received their full credit entitlement were also explored.

Another key aim from the outset of the study was to interview students who had commenced but subsequently withdrew from their degree programme to explore the reasons why they did withdraw. Unfortunately, despite many efforts, we were unable to secure interviews with any of this sample.

Within the general theme of transition the following areas were explored to capture views from the perspective of the students: the reasons why they studied at college and university; their experiences making the move into degree study; how they compared the learning and teaching experiences between college and university; their views

on the support mechanisms at university, and their suggestions and recommendations on how to improve the transition experience for future groups of students.

To complement the data gathered from the student perspective, relevant staff involved within both the HNC/D and degree programmes in these subject areas were also identified to explore their views on the current issues which students face as they make this transition and what changes they would recommend to improve articulation between HNC/Ds and degrees.

A further key aim of the study was to implement an appropriate internal and external dissemination strategy to inform policy-makers and practitioners of the key findings as they emerged. To this end preliminary findings have been presented at a GGAP-led College University Subject Partnership (CUSP) event; a recent 'GGAP to the Future' event which reflected on the first five years of GGAP and its aims and objectives for the next two years; a GCU Annual Research Day and the aforementioned SQAs HN Enhancement Pilot Project, where we presented to the Projects' Steering Group. Publication of this final report will enable us to disseminate further to

appropriate audiences within the sector.

1.3 Structure of the Report

Section Two provides details of the methodological approaches adopted in the study. This section explains what sampling methods were adopted in relation to the selection of students, the fieldwork strategy and limitations of the study. In Section Three we summarize the key findings that have emerged from the data collected from the interviews with students and focus groups with staff. In Section Four we provide a concise summary of the main conclusions which have emerged from the study and put forward recommendations within a wider context for the development of articulation policy and provision.

Section Two Methodology

2.1 Sampling Framework and Fieldwork Strategy

2.1.1 Sampling framework – choice of programmes and students

The main determinant for selection of subject areas, as we have noted, was the findings from the HN Tracking Study which identified Social Sciences, Business and Computing as HNs which most students were using to progress to degree study. In addition the subject area of Engineering has historically had unique transition issues, particularly with respect to mathematics, so this was added to complete the quartet of subject areas.

Full-time DEs, depending on the subject area and/or articulation agreements between colleges and university, can of course enter with full advanced standing to either four year or 2+2 degree programmes. The latter type of degree is a tailored progression route into Levels 3 and 4 and it was important to select programmes

that reflected both these articulation routes to enable us to compare and contrast in greater depth the transition experiences of articulating students. In addition, the four year programmes also allowed us to explore issues for those who entered without advanced standing. With the inclusion of part-time programmes, we chose the following within the four generic subject areas:

Social Sciences

BA/BA (Hons) Social Sciences (four year, full-time degree programme)

BA/BA (Hons) Social Sciences (five year, part-time degree programme)

Business and Management

BA/BA (Hons) Business (four year, full-time degree programme)

BA/BA (Hons) Business (2-7 year, part-time degree programme)

BA/BA (Hons) Management, Technology and Enterprise (MTE) (2+2, full-time degree programme)

Engineering

BSc/BSc (Hons) Audio Technology with Multimedia (2+2, full-time degree programme)

We also selected a small number of additional Engineering programmes to enable us to further explore

the transition experiences for students entering Engineering. The interviews secured came from the following two programmes:

BEng/BEng (Hons) Electrical Power Engineering (4-5 year, part-time degree programme)

BEng/BEng (Hons) Mechanical Electronic Systems Engineering (four year, part-time degree programme)

Computing

BSc/BSc (Hons) Cyber Security and Networks (2+2, full-time degree programme)

As the main purpose was to explore the theme of transition with *current* undergraduate students it was important to select students who were on their degree programme long enough for the research team to explore the identified themes in greater depth. This would allow the team to capture a fuller picture of views on areas such as academic literacies and curriculum matching.

To enable a sample of HN entrants to be chosen from the selected degree programmes, the initial pool of students were identified through a combination of two selection methods. Firstly, we retrieved relevant information

held on GCU's Integrated Student Information System (ISIS). Secondly, if the information on ISIS was incomplete for a given degree programme, we augmented this initial data by liaising with relevant colleagues from these programmes to request additional data from their records of HN entrants. This resulted in us establishing a sample of current students based on the following criteria: whether they were studying on a four year degree or a 2+2 programme and with respect to the former whether they entered either as DEs or without advanced standing; the academic year they commenced their degree programme; mode of study; age, gender and previous college attended.

2.1.2 Fieldwork strategy

A total of 221 students who commenced degree study from 2009-10 to 2012-13 were identified from the selected degree programmes. Initial contact was made via email to invite students to participate in the research. Follow-up contact was made via both email and telephone after a non-response to our initial request. An incentive of four prizes of £100 gift vouchers to be awarded to a participating student from each of the generic

subject areas was offered as a means through which to encourage participation.

The fieldwork was conducted in various phases commencing with Social Sciences students in the autumn of 2011 and culminating in spring 2013 with students from Engineering. In total, 55 interviews were secured from the 221 who were contacted which represented 25% of the sample. Data was gathered from one-to-one semi-structured interviews conducted either face-to-face or by telephone and a thematic analysis framework was adopted to identify key themes.

While on the whole securing interviews with a quarter of the overall number of students we initially contacted was reasonably successful, and in line with similar studies, we had hoped to conduct more interviews given the total number of the initial pool of participants we had identified. However it proved impossible to establish positive contact with the remaining students despite numerous follow-ups.

2.1.3 Characteristics of the sample

Of the 55 interviews secured, 43 (36 full-time and seven part-time)

were DEs and 12 (10 full-time and two part-time) entered without advanced standing. With respect to age, 44% (24) of our sample were aged 26 and over, and more females 53% (29) than males were interviewed. The total number of colleges where the 55 students had studied was 11, the majority of which were in the Greater Glasgow area with a small number located further afield.

A full breakdown of students contacted and interviews conducted for each degree programme is detailed in the Appendix at the end of the report.

2.1.4 Focus Groups

In total six focus groups with relevant academic staff from the university and college sectors were held to discuss their views on the key academic transition issues facing HN entrants (an SQA representative participated in one of the focus groups). Two focus groups were held for Social Sciences (one with university staff and one with college staff); three were held in the field of Business/MTE (one with university staff from Business, one with university staff from MTE and a combination of college/SQA representation that covered the areas of Business/MTE) and one in

the area of Computing comprising representation from both the university and the colleges. We had organized two additional focus groups in the areas of Audio Technology and Engineering but due to participants' competing commitments these had to be cancelled. A total of 26 participated in the six focus groups.

2.1.5 Limitations of sampling strategy

While we were successful in involving students from all of our target disciplines, and this included students from a number of colleges, a range of ages and with varied previous experiences and qualifications, the failure to involve any students who had withdrawn was a disappointment. It is also possible that students who had more negative experiences and held more critical views regarding the transition experience may have been more reluctant to engage with the study, despite our reassurances about confidentiality. Nevertheless there were a number of consistent themes emerging from our study, and on this basis we feel that we are able to present fairly robust evidence regarding the experiences of students who have followed this progression route.

Section Three

Findings from the Study

3.1 Learner Journeys

Research and national data published by the SFC have shown that HNC/D students are a more heterogeneous group than the undergraduate population found in universities. HN students, as our sample confirms, come from a wider age range and the majority are less likely to have the formal educational qualifications to enable entry to undergraduate degree programmes (Ingram and Gallacher, 2011 & SFC 2013). For the majority of students who progress to degree studies from HNs this can be seen as a ‘second chance’ route which is often complex and non-linear. In this study we had an opportunity to explore the range and complexity of these routes. A number of different groups could be identified.

Firstly there are a number of relatively young students who failed to gain the Highers they would have needed to progress to a degree.

Well I left school earlier than I should have done, I left at the end of 5th year, I didn't get on too well at school, but I did want to continue my education a bit further, I didn't want to leave it at high school level. So college seemed a natural step because I didn't have the grades for university. (L119, Level 1, Business)

In some cases they had a fairly clear idea of the route they wished to follow, while in others this only emerged over time, and on some occasions after some ‘false starts’. While many of these students lacked university entrance requirements, some had already started a degree course, but this had been a ‘false start’ for them.

I did actually go to university, but I only went for a year. I went and did History at Glasgow University ...straight after I left school and then I decided I just didn't want to do at all, which was a bit of a waste, but oh well at least I'm doing what I want to do. (L381, DE, Audio Technology with Multimedia)

There are also older students who make the decision to return to study because of changes in

career path brought on by personal circumstances or external factors such as being made redundant, or a desire to pursue an earlier interest.

I kind of wanted to change what I was doing. I've been a professional bartender for 15 years almost and then I kind of lost interest and passion for what I was doing and I decided to pursue something that I wanted to do since I was a teenager, so be involved in music and the music industry. So then I decided to join college and start studying. (L379, DE, Audio Technology with Multimedia)

Among this group were a number of women whose children were grown up which freed them to pursue an interest in returning to education.

The part-time Engineering students were also a distinct sub-group. They had decided to pursue a route of apprenticeship training, although some were qualified for entry to university, combining learning their trade in the workplace with studying at college and university. To both 'earn and learn' for this group of students was instrumental to their career ambitions.

Well I just wanted to get a job, after seeing that and then speaking to people about the place, about [name of employer], they had said 'Oh we do send you to university, there is opportunities to do that' I kind of thought it means I'm earning and I'm getting learning, plus I'm getting put through it and then I've still got a wage coming in at the same time and I'm doing the same at the end of it, I don't need to look for a job once I've got my degree. (L453, p/t DE, Engineering)

This evidence of the heterogeneity of the HN population, and the range and complexity of the routes which students are following, creates challenges for the staff in the colleges who are supporting them in their learning journeys. This helps explain some of the distinctive features of the learning and teaching cultures found in colleges, in which there is a greater emphasis on student support, when compared with universities. This point was made by a number of staff participants in the focus group discussions:

...in terms of confidence, a lot of people we find who come

in at NC level who then move up through HN, when you first see them they wouldn't say boo to a goose, they're really nervous, their social skills are quite limited and all the rest of it and you do watch them progress all the way through HN's to the point where maybe university is a viable progress for them. (College Staff Focus Group, Business/MTE)

3.2 Becoming Informed about Degree Opportunities

Getting the information which they need to make an informed choice about the most appropriate course is an important stage in the progression to degree level study for these students. As we have indicated for many students the route has not been a straightforward or linear one. Deciding when to go to university varied within the overall sample, ranging from a clear intention prior to commencing HNC/D study to various time points during their HN course. Some college staff have also suggested that because students are so focused on successfully completing their HNs they are not as proactive as they might be

in seeking out information about university courses.

...I think they're probably very non proactive. They'll probably read some blurb on the website and that'll be the extent of their research, plus maybe what their friends have said...., it's very difficult to get them to move out their comfort zone, they make a decision based on very little information. (College/ University Staff Focus Group, Computing)

The decision-making process, including GCU as the institutional choice of study, was influenced by a range of factors including family and friends of the students, some of whom were currently at the university or graduates from the institution, advice from college staff, funding implications and articulation agreements between the university and college(s) enabling entry with full advanced standing. The latter two factors were linked, in part, to students wanting to complete their degree in the quickest time.

Information and advice from college staff can clearly be very useful and important. This was illustrated by

students on the degree in Audio Technology with Multimedia who referred to two college lecturers who were GCU graduates and who gave them the idea of doing this degree.

Well two of the lecturers that I had when I was doing the HNC at...[Name of College]... had just graduated from Glasgow Caledonian and they were teaching me and they were talking about what they learned at university and it sounded quite interesting to me. So that kind of influenced me to get into Caledonian University... (L379, DE, Audio Technology with Multimedia)

However a number of college staff commented on the difficulties of having the best up-to- date information to advise students regarding university courses, and the value of joint work with university staff in advising students about the opportunities which were open to them.

..., if you ask me honestly if I could give an honest answer whether colleges provide enough information I would say no. (College Staff Focus Group, Business/MTE)

A number of students commented positively about the value of university staff coming out to the college to provide information about their courses. An MTE student who had studied on an HND in Business commented:

I actually didn't know about the course and what happened was... [Name of Course Leader]..., she actually came into colleges and she's telling people about this course and because of that I was quite interested in it. (L359, DE, MTE)

Other events were organized through GGAP with staff going out to the colleges or students coming to GCU for a 'College on Campus' day and students found these introductory events very useful.

So a few of us went to...[Name of HEI]... and as I said Caley was the only one that was different that they came to us, and also there was a specific day laid on, the articulation project people...and we got a sample lecture and stuff like that. I just thought it was really good. (L102, Level 1, Social Sciences)

Students also accessed information in other ways, including attending Open Days, accessing the GCU website and contacting relevant staff on the degree programme. The information received by the full-time students from the institution about the degree programmes, and the university in general, was viewed positively by the majority of the students.

For the majority of part-time students, particularly the Engineering group, while applying directly to the institution was relatively straightforward, some issues were raised about accessing the application form and the late release of the programme timetable which impacted on the students' preparation for study.

3.3 The Value of Induction Programmes

The majority of students commented positively on the value of induction sessions which provided opportunities to familiarize themselves with the university and degree programme, make contact with other students, and seek advice on academic writing skills.

It was very useful, especially how to note take, there is a lot of note taking in university, so I think that helped you. But just in terms of how to use the library and stuff like that, how to take books out and that was all very helpful for me. (L363, DE, MTE)

It was noted that there were a number of formal structured induction programmes of different kinds, depending on the subject area. These included a Maths Summer School and also a Learning Strategies Week for Social Science students, the latter of which was commented on as being particularly useful.

Yeah it was really good. A lot of it went along with what my lecturer at college had said about how they grade it and all that, but we went through presentations and all that and I really got a lot out of it, it prepared me for what to expect in uni. Doing stuff like presentations, like presentations is one thing I didn't do at college, so getting to do that and then being shown how they mark it and everything really set me up...So I think I would have struggled

*if I hadn't gone to that week.
(L231, DE, Social Sciences)*

However not all students participated in an induction programme, and some issues were raised about improving structure and content. It was noted by a member of university staff in one of the focus groups that structured induction is more common in the first year than in later years.

...I think that one of the differences is that when they come in in 1st year there's more inductions built into 1st year modules in general than there are at 2nd, 3rd and 4th year. (University Staff Focus Group, Social Sciences)

Associated with this was the suggestion that it is easier to provide tailored induction and supports for students entering 2+2 programmes than for those joining four year programmes.

Yes, although I think if you've got a 3rd year entry then all students are coming and they're all together, you know they're in it together, you know and they're all starting universities for the first time in 3rd year. But I imagine if

you're maybe articulating into business degree where you've had students coming through their 1st and 2nd year at university and our students are joining them in 3rd year, I would imagine that that transitional process is probably more difficult rather than all FE students starting 3rd year at the same time. (College Staff Focus Group, Business/MTE)

It was not clear whether formal induction sessions were provided for part-time Engineering students, but some did highlight informal ice-breaking sessions with university staff, and a video made by GGAP on the differences between college and university study which they found useful.

3.4 Adjusting to the University Environment

Many of our respondents commented on a number of issues which were associated with responding to the environment of the university when compared with the college.

3.4.1 Differences in scale and the learning environment

A recurrent theme in many of the interviews was the need to get accustomed to the different environment of the university setting including the layout and size of the campus. HN entrants commented on the scale and continuity of study arrangements at college when compared with university.

*So you're basically you've one wee library, one canteen, one lecture room...you've got your four same lecturers every week. So basically it was a kind of routine thing...Until you come to uni you don't know what to expect.... I did not expect the vastness of the university... but they did say the culture shock is incredibly, incredibly shocking because you're so used to an enclosed space really, it's like a wee cage in regards to college.
(L302, DE, Social Sciences)*

However we did find that the doubts expressed by those who found the transition difficult eased over time as they became accustomed to their surroundings and the structure of learning and teaching on their degree. A

consistent theme in many of the interviews was that the transition into degree study was a *continual* process. We asked all respondents how they felt *now* about being at university compared to commencing their course and, while issues relating to the environment, academic literacies and the curricular were still of concern to some, a great majority stated they were more confident and were enjoying their degree experience.

3.4.2 HN entrants' integration with peer group

The issue of integration with their peer group, both academically and socially, was evident in a number of the interviews with former HN students, and some differences emerged here between the four year and 2+2 degree programmes. Feelings of isolation were experienced more by DEs within the four year programmes who indicated that they were less integrated into both the university and degree study. They felt they have had less time to make friends with their peers, had feelings of being an outsider or not in a 'clique'. The contrast between the routine and continuity experienced at college and the environment of the university was expressed by an

older Social Science student:

Yes you end up really close knit because you're studying basically together [in college]. So you find that people do help each other, because you are so close knit you do, until you get to know everybody and the way they work, everybody is all helping each other and they come together as a group. Whereas in uni you've got people, you'll go into a classroom here, a lecture here, just say you go in to a lecture, you're next lecture could be a few hours later, but only 2 or 3 people from that class will be going to that class. So the continuity is not there to get to know people in the same way as what it is in college. So that's a difference. (L218, Level 2, Social Sciences)

University staff commented on the problems which this could create for students who lacked peer group support which can be so helpful.

They don't have the informal support here because they're going into groups of students who know each other, there's not that informal network to support them and if you go

round direct entrants at level 3 you're lacking that, it takes some of them a while to bed down and just get familiar with their surroundings. But level 3 is not the place to do it because ...you're expected to hit the ground running in level 3. (University Staff Focus Group, Social Sciences)

However, while this problem of integration was identified by a number of DEs, it should also be noted that it was not shared by all students, and there was clearly a process of assimilation and integration for a number of students. This is illustrated by these comments from a Level 3 Business entrant:

I was kind of sceptical at first, I thought it might be a bit difficult, but I've kind of settled in well. I've made new friends, I've met a lot of people in my class who I've got on well with and they've kind of helped me through it, they've understood that I'm a direct entry, they've kind of taken me under their wing almost like 'Yeah this is what we do, this is what you can do' and when it comes to work then if I need any help I can always rely on them

because they've had the past couple of years' experience, they know the best ways round the university and how to do the work, how to reference etc. so I found that really good. (L323, DE, Business)

Students on the 2+2 degree programmes were, by and large, less concerned with this issue of integration. Many had come with students from the same college and therefore had built friendships prior to arriving at the institution. They were commencing their degree studies as a coherent group, along with former HN students from other colleges. While in some respects they were less integrated into the university in the short term, there were opportunities to develop relationships with continuing students who attended the same lectures.

I found that getting settled into lectures and things was fine because everyone knew that we were from college, so they kind of spoke to us a bit better about how to, I don't know, how to take notes in lectures and work in a seminar and things like that...(L366, DE, MTE)

The part-time Engineering students while only timetabled one day a week did not feel isolated within the institution. They tended to stick together as they were all part-time though a few also mixed with the full-time students who attended the same lectures, and some knew colleagues from work either in the same year or above them which helped to alleviate any issues of isolation. Peer group support seemed to be an important characteristic of this group. A number of them commented favourably on their identification with the university, and some reported coming in to work with fellow students on the campus at weekends.

I regularly come in at the weekends and meet up with one of the other part time students, either we're doing assignments or what we're going to do now is going over examples for the exams that are coming up...(L449, p/t DE, Engineering)

3.4.3 Reflections on level of entry

Students within our sample were entering at different levels, and there were also differences between DEs into four year degree

programmes and 2+2 programmes.

The majority of DEs on the four year degree programmes indicated that they would make the same choice *now* to enter at the level they did, despite any difficulties they had experienced with integration. Their reasons were varied but included that it would have been repetitive to enter at a lower level; it meant they completed their degree in the quickest time; there was less of a financial burden, and that the transition was not as difficult as they had anticipated.

By and large the majority of entrants to 2+2 programmes were also content with this progression structure. Entering degree study made up of 'college only' students provided a good structure of support from staff and from the student peer group.

As we noted, our sample included a number of students on Social Science and Business degree programmes who did not receive full credit for their HNs and entered at Levels 1 or 2. However these students also indicated they would make the same choice *now* to enter at the level they did. As a Level 1 Business student noted:

I just think as well, like see with starting with a new class, like no one knew each other, it's just like everyone's going into the same sort of situation and I think I've got a good class as well. So I've made good friends and stuff, so I think it's been easy to integrate into uni.
(L122, Level 1, Business)

Students entering the first year of their part-time Engineering programmes were on the whole fine with their level of entry. However, while they attended tutorials with other part-time students, many of the lectures also included students on full-time Engineering programmes who were now in their second year of study. This raised some concerns from our part-time participants that they were in a disadvantageous position compared to that of full-time students in their second year, who had been taught baseline knowledge from the previous year, which the incoming part-time students did not receive.

3.4.4 Tutors' awareness of HN entrants

Tutors' awareness of HN entrants was an issue which was explored with the entrants to four year degree programmes. The majority

stated that none or very few of their tutors were aware they had studied in college. In many cases respondents did not see this as an issue, and indeed some were happy with this, as they did not want to feel they were different from continuing students in the same class. However, for some, tutors' awareness *was* an issue where they thought it would be beneficial for them if lecturers were aware that they were from college. Lecturers' assumptions that everyone in the current year 'would know this from last year' were a particular concern raised by some of the Social Science students. This issue was also raised in a college focus group where it was pointed out that in a 2+2 programme everyone is at the same level and the lecturer is shaping what they are teaching to that group of students, whereas students entering an already existing cohort may have more difficulty in adjusting to the learning and teaching environment more familiar to most in the classes. As one Social Science DE stated:

Maybe make the lecturers aware that we're HN direct entrants, maybe for them to be more aware and to be a wee bit more understanding

of that. I mean I know they've got major demands on their time as well...but I think it would really have helped me personally if somebody had taken the time to say 'right I know you're a direct entrant is there anything you're struggling with?' and nobody did. (L203, DE, Social Sciences)

3.5 Academic Literacies

Overall, students appreciated the quality of the experience at college, and the extensive support and advice (both formal and informal) which was provided in a well-structured environment.

I think the teachers were quite good at college ... the teaching quality it was quite good... they made themselves, like we always knew their email address, where their room was and they were quite happy for us, at any time, if we were just confused about something or needed help, just to go see them. (L122, Level 1, Business)

We have noted above that many HN students are on a complex learning journey, and for that reason many of them need a considerable

measure of support if they are to complete their HNs successfully. This has led to a very supportive approach to learning and teaching in the colleges which is valued by students. However, this can lead to some difficulties when they have to deal with the more independent learning style expected in the university.

Students did note that a number of college staff recognized the need to make them aware of differences in the type of learning and teaching experienced at college and university and that university was a 'step-up'.

...they did tell us that what we're doing covering here over a year you'll have to cover in 12 weeks once you get to uni, so we knew that it would be a lot more work at uni in a short period of time...and at a deeper level yes. (L428, DE, Cyber Security and Networks)

Some of our respondents were very positive about the level of preparation. They noted that college staff held discussions in class and gave advice on how best to cope with the transition into university.

I think they made it quite clear that it was going to be different in terms of, at college it's almost like going back to school in terms of half a day for each subject and it's the same people and we're sitting in a classroom environment. You know it's going to be different, there's going to be lectures and a lot more independent work and things like that. (L210, DE, Social Sciences)

In addition it was reported that former students from some colleges were invited back to give guest lectures to prospective degree students about studying at university.

Despite these positive views many of our sample were critical about the level of preparation. A number of interlinked issues were noted by both students and staff in respect of the learning and teaching delivered in college compared to what they have encountered at university.

3.5.1 A greater emphasis on independent learning

A majority of our overall sample across all subject areas commented on the more independent and less structured environments and the

greater emphasis on independent learning within their degree programme as compared to their college experience. The importance at university of being proactive, taking ownership, being responsible for learning and improving time management skills were key themes that our respondents acknowledged in many of the interviews.

Definitely, that's the biggest difference of them all is the amount of work you've got to do on your own. As I said at the college everything's given to you and it's just up to you to remember it. At university there's a good bit that you've got to go and learn yourself. (L449, p/t DE, Engineering)

A number of students commented that while being allowed to resubmit coursework helped them to pass their units, it also impacted on them developing their capacity to be independent learners and enhancing their time management skills, and did not prepare them for the stricter submission deadlines on their degree.

I wasn't used to continually reading and doing assessments because college was very relaxed and hand in

dates were kind of more of a suggestion for a lot of people... missing a date it wasn't that big a deal, whereas you get marked down significantly or fail now. (L381, DE, Audio Technology with Multimedia)

The comparison between what is expected on degree study and experienced at college is summed up by this student:

The transition into uni, it is a bit threatening at the beginning, there is a big difference between your written work at college and your written work at university. University is a much higher standard, it's much more academic, structured, there's a lot of reference to your literature, a lot of things you need to go and research and read. At college it's much easier, it's less kind of in depth, it's what you learn and you write about what you learn. At university it's much more up to yourself, you need to know and understand where you have to go and research and look for what you need. (L379, DE, Audio Technology with Multimedia)

HN students, as one focus group participant stated are ‘very much guided through things’ in college and find the change to university sometimes difficult. This view was also echoed in this comment by another college staff member:

...but the confidence to be someone who can learn on their own and do independent learning, I do think they struggle with that. (College Staff Focus Group, Business/ MTE)

However, similar to some of our student sample, they also suggested one of the ways to address the issue of developing independent learning skills was for HN students to be encouraged to be more proactive and not to just say, as another focus group participant put it, ‘Oh I’ll just go to my lecturer at college again, they’ll give me all the information’.

College staff, while recognizing that they often provided a very high level of support for students which did not encourage the capacity for independent learning, also emphasized the point, which has been made above, that many college students were ‘second chance’ learners who lacked confidence and required a lot of

support if they were to succeed.

...they’ve maybe been with us for 4 years and for some of them they need the 4 years in college and they need to know that there’s someone, like myself or one of the other lecturers that’s just always there if they need it. There’s that caring, nurturing and looking after them and then letting them go when...and by that time they’re ready, they’ve got the confidence. But some of our students it can take them that length of time for a few of them. (College Staff Focus Group, Social Sciences)

There is therefore a dilemma for college staff in that they recognize that there is a need to encourage a more independent learning style among students, but they also are concerned to ensure that learners receive the support which they need. This was recognized in one of the focus groups where a member of staff recognized a need to develop new approaches to learning and teaching:

I think we’re miles behind on learning and teaching approaches. I mean we’re still

stuck into 3 hour blocks of classes, you know classes last 3 hours... (College Staff Focus Group, Business/MTE)

3.5.2 Enhancing critical thinking and analysis skills

A recurrent theme that ran through the interviews with students and discussions with staff was that degree level study involves greater emphasis on critical thinking and analysis. The majority of our overall sample across all subject areas acknowledged that developing more in-depth analytical skills and being encouraged to develop and follow through an argument in their assessments was a major difference in learning and teaching approaches between degree and college study. They had none or very little experience of developing these skills while studying for their HN, the realization of which dawned on many students when completing their first university assignment and receiving feedback.

Yes that was really a big difference because I have no idea how to do it [critically analyse], I wasn't sure what she meant first time when she said you have to make an argument, you have to

analyse it, I wasn't sure what to do. The first time, when I submitted my report my essay was quite descriptive and I didn't get good marks, it was in 50 somewhere and I asked my lecturer why is that? (L353, DE, MTE)

The unpreparedness for university style learning and teaching as described in the above quote reflects an *expectations gap*, a theme which emerged in many of the interviews with both DEs into four year and 2+2 degree programmes. The theme was also raised in focus group discussions, as one participant puts it:

...their expectations of what they're coming to are slightly skewed from their experience in college and they don't realise that going from college to university isn't just about the level of knowledge and understanding, but it's also about a change and a different level in how you learn and I think there's probably a gap there, that they don't quite understand... (University Staff Focus Group, Social Sciences)

It was frequently suggested that the approach in the college could

be described as ‘spoon feeding’, an emphasis on providing descriptive answers to questions, and/or ‘tick-box’ criteria when it came to marking HN coursework.

It’s the whole change in assessment method, in ...I suppose they spoon feed you a wee bit, but there’s certain boxes they must want to tick and if you put it in you put it in, if you don’t you remediate and you add it in and then you pass. (L306, DE, Social Sciences)

College staff in the focus groups also recognized that, in some cases, the assessment structure associated with the HN units did not encourage an approach which emphasized critical analysis.

...every work is a pass except for the graded unit. So you just simply say like ‘that’s me, I passed, I achieved the learning outcome’ there is no motivation at all, but you can stretch people to be more critical and again the other thing is assessments are, by variable nature, they are a reflection of the learning outcome, if the learning outcome says critically

*evaluate then that will show in the assessment. So there are lots of things when you talk about this one, why our students aren’t as critical as they should be, especially when they come to the universities and then it will be a big stumbling block so they’ll get **** critically analyse. (College Staff Focus Group, Business/MTE)*

It would appear that the need to encourage a greater emphasis on a more critical and analytical approach is recognized by students and staff, and there is a need to ensure that the assessment arrangements within the HN units reflect this. A member of college staff suggested that opportunities exist within the new HN framework that is being introduced to make the assessments more rigorous.

It has the potential to provide a whole range of assessment experience that would be good for university, so long as the centres take that opportunity to have the range. (College Staff Focus Group, Social Sciences)

3.5.3 Knowledge of referencing

Another recurrent theme which emerged is that many degree students did not feel well prepared with respect to the academic conventions with respect to referencing of sources. It was noted that while some college tutors do place some emphasis on this, including advice on plagiarism, in most cases, across all of the subject areas, students felt that more could have been done to prepare them. The majority of the students reported that in college they were either not taught referencing or the teaching of it was at best limited.

In college you didn't have to have as many references, referencing wasn't really a big thing, I mean you did have to have references, but it's really when you're writing essays here, like balancing your argument and backing it up with references, obviously you can't say something, you have to get a reference for it. (L400, DE, Audio Technology with Multimedia)

Discussion within some of the focus groups noted that some college tutors do teach referencing and in particular the focus groups with university staff from Business

and MTE acknowledged some improvements in the standard of referencing by HN entrants. It was also noted in the focus groups that referencing, as with other academic transition issues such as exam techniques and plagiarism, was not just a 'HN issue', students entering from school also had similar problems.

To help address some of these academic literacy issues students utilized various approaches on their degree programme including attending specific lectures from relevant academic and support staff, attending workshops on academic writing skills, or self-teaching through accessing online materials or other resources.

3.5.4 Differences in approaches to structure, content and submission of assessments

In some respects part of the HN assessment framework prepared many of the students for university. For example the Graded Unit component (project, exam or both depending on HN subject area) was noted as providing transferable skills for university-style coursework and exams. Furthermore, for a small number of students from Social Sciences and Engineering, college lecturers prepared them

for university level assessment by marking their coursework to a university standard so as to demonstrate how it would be marked on their degree.

For example my sociology tutor, she was like 'When you first get marks back, don't be annoyed that they're low ... it's just that she was marking harshly to show you that they don't go 'Oh that's ok' she was marking it to the point where you had to put a lot of work into it. So now when I go to uni I get good marks, it's not because I was rubbish back then, it was because she was marking me harshly and taught me things that I needed to ..., like sort of preparing you what might happen at uni because we're not like at high school where they'll correct it for you. (L105, Level 1, Social Sciences)

While there were a number of examples of this kind, a recurrent theme throughout many of the interviews and the focus group discussions was the variability in preparation for university assessment within and between colleges. Many of the students felt it would have benefited them

if more could have been done at college to prepare them for alternative methods of assessment.

The majority of DE students into both four year and 2+2 programmes emphasized that university assessment was a step-up from the level what was expected at college. The greater emphasis on longer academic-style of essays and exams in the degree programmes was noted as creating challenges. On the whole, the level of difficulty experienced on either HNC or HND level assessment was described as relatively easy. One DE into MTE commented on the input expected into essays and the minimum expected to achieve at college:

In the college... we don't have to reference stuff, we don't critically review that stuff and in the university they expect us to know how to reference, how to critically review it, how to make your own words, you know in your own language, but in college it was totally different, they do expect us to write reports and essays, but in a very easy language, not in an academic thing. (L353, DE, MTE)

A number of the part-time students

on the Engineering degrees, while recognizing the value of the HNC in providing a good foundation, also referred to the big step-up in the standards expected in the exams. This is summarized by this student:

It was a lot harder, a lot harder. I would have said it was probably twice as hard because in the Graded Unit I got 94% I think for that and then for the one exam that we've done to date I got 56% or something, so it was quite a big jump in my grades, my grades did show that. I wasn't expecting it to be such a massive contrast in the two exams. (L458, p/t DE, Engineering)

Some college staff recognized the problems associated with preparing students for the type and level of assessments which they would encounter on degree programmes. However it was also suggested that this issue was complicated by the extent to which HNs were also vocational programmes which had a role in preparing students for the world of work, and employers' priorities might be different from those of the universities.

...we can't ignore the HNC/HND's are vocational programmes and we can't ignore the fact that not every student is going to progress to university. Now for employers the project is probably more beneficial for the students doing a double credit project than it is doing an exam. You know so it's whether you're going down a route well we have a HNC/D Business that's kind of vocational, more vocational units in there and then we have maybe more of an academic route where you have the other areas which would prepare them better for university and split it like that. But otherwise we can't have an HNC/D which is all things to all people. (College Staff Focus Group, Business/MTE)

This points to a potential conflict which must be recognized and addressed. However it should also be noted that there is evidence that the majority of students doing HNs in areas such as Business Studies, Computing and Social Sciences do now progress to degree level study, and it is important that they are prepared for this type of study (Ingram and Gallacher, 2011).

3.6 Curricular Issues

The majority of the respondents agreed that the curriculum taught on their HNC/D had been a valuable preparation for their degree programmes. While a number of students stated there was some overlap/repetition between the subjects taught on the HN and degree, this was often viewed in a positive light. By having a 'refresher' it enhanced their knowledge for learning the subjects in greater depth.

Social Sciences students were in general very positive about the links between their HNs and the degree.

Yeah definitely the topics we covered I feel has prepared me really well. (L307, DE, Social Sciences)

However a number of the DEs highlighted some gaps in their knowledge when they made the transition into degree study. The main issue related to the teaching of statistical packages in colleges. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) is the main programme which is used in universities, but a number of students commented that they were not introduced to this in the colleges and this placed

them at a disadvantage when they commenced the degree programme.

...in my research class, like SPSS and people had obviously learned that in 2nd year. In college we didn't do that because they didn't have the facility and you done all the stuff long hand, like standard deviation, you didn't do anything with the packages and when we came in part of the module was to do, one of the assessments was to analyse data and stuff like that and I had no clue. (L306, DE, Social Sciences)

This problem was also recognized by staff in one of the focus groups. However it should be noted that recent developments have begun to address this issue. A GGAP funded project has explored new articulating pathways into the BSc (Hons) Psychology programme at GCU from HND Social Sciences. Students entering into Level 3 of the degree must have used a statistical package in one of their Psychology units of their HND. The PSPP package has been identified for this purpose as a free alternative to SPSS, hence a saving for colleges in terms of licence fees which was

mentioned in the college focus group as a barrier to introducing stats packages.

Staff from the colleges and university also recognized that it was difficult to prepare HN entrants for every possible subject option in Levels 3 and 4 and developing transferable skills is what should be prioritized.

I think it's about developing the skills, and having had a brief look at the bachelor course level 3 and 4 has so much choice... so I think it's about you can't prepare them for every possible option in level 3 and 4 in the bachelor programme, but you can give them those skills. (College Staff Focus Group, Social Sciences)

In the area of Business students were also generally very positive about the fit between the HN curriculum and their degree studies.

Yes. I feel as if a lecturer ever makes a reference to a theorist or an idea it has been something that's been touched on previously.... Certain courses within the HND, such as economic courses have helped me hugely in terms of

determining what classes it is that I'm interested in and what I'm picking. So yeah I'd probably say that the courses themselves and the way that the modules are broken down in the HNC/HND definitely helps you in terms of your options picking and going forward. (L318, DE, Business)

The value of co-operation between college and university staff to ensure that there was a good fit between the HNs and degrees in the area of Business emerged as an issue in the focus group discussions. In particular, work to ensure curriculum matching between the HNs and the MTE degree was noted.

Yes I think there's a very good fit between the HND Admin and IT and HND Business in these two programmes. Again that was something we looked at quite closely when we developed the programme and we worked, we did focus groups around the colleges and we worked with the colleges when we developed the programme. (University Staff Focus Group, MTE)

It was also noted by university

staff that the Cyber Security and Networks degree had been developed to provide more flexibility for HN students.

But the Cyber Security and Networks is a bit more flexible because if, for example, they've done certain units previously in the college then it would possibly be a pre-requisite to the modules that they will be doing at university and if they didn't then they can take it as an option in the 3rd year and then in the Honours year they will do what other students would do in the 3rd year ... So it's like more of a flexible programme. (College/ University Staff Focus Group, Computing)

Successful completion of the HND in Sound Production is the main route into the 2+2 Audio Technology with Multimedia programme, and most of this group of students agreed that the topics learned on the HND fitted well with the course content of the degree. The different software taught and used on the HND was also generally viewed as good preparation for the degree.

A particular theoretical component of this subject area is Digital Audio

Theory and all of the students stated that the teaching of this on the HND was good preparation for some of the modules taught in the first trimester of the degree.

... I wouldn't have been able to do the uni stuff if I hadn't have done that at college. (L406, DE, Audio Technology with Multimedia)

All students on the Engineering degree programmes agreed that the preparation/fit between their HNC and degree was good. The HNC laid the foundations on the mechanical and electrical side for the next step-up in learning at degree level.

I would say so yeah, I think they do kind of...although there is quite a jump in academic level, I think the basic information is there. The HNC lays the foundations of what would be expected of you when you go into university. (L458, p/t DE, Engineering)

The main problem area identified was maths. A number of respondents commented that the level of maths on the HNC was much lower than that expected on the degree, and it did not really provide an adequate preparation.

... the maths on the HNC is not really anything compared to what you get in the degree. You can build up from it, but it's just not as hard, it's not even as if you get one question, it's maybe out of 10 questions you'd have one question that was degree level, you don't get that, it's just all pretty simple maths. (L453, p/t DE, Engineering)

This student did have Higher Maths (as did a number of other respondents), but was of the view that students who only had the maths studied in the HNC would struggle to cope. It was however noted that the university provided a Maths Summer School to assist with this problem.

3.7 Support Mechanisms at University

A number of forms of support are available to students who make the transition from HNs to degree study, and we were keen to explore the extent to which they are used. A number of these forms of support are of course available to all students.

3.7.1 Support from university staff

We have noted above the high level of support which many students received from college staff in the relatively small and close-knit HN classes. By contrast the larger scale of the university leads to an emphasis on more formal arrangements with relevant staff. However most of our respondents have found staff accessible and approachable providing the advice required or directing them to other supports within the university.

...for me I would say the lecturers that I had they're quite helpful, they're there for you and if you've got, like now I'm doing a report and I'm kind of struggling on this question and I just emailed my lecturer and she got back to me and she told me it's best if you just answer it, critically evaluate, you know she just helped me out and I just feel that they are helpful. (L359, DE, MTE)

Given the scale of the university, emailing emerged as a common way of making contact with staff, and in general students were happy with the responses they received. However a minority said they were unsure who would be the most

appropriate member of staff to contact or spoke less favourably about their availability and/or level of advice they received.

In later phases of the fieldwork we also explored views of specific supports that the university had recently put in place for students. In particular the Learning Development Centres (LDCs) were beginning to take shape within the institution to offer academic writing supports and advice on study skills. Not all who were interviewed in later phases of the fieldwork had heard of the LDCs but those that had were on the whole positive about their role and the advice they gave on aspects of academic writing.

The library and online supports, particularly GCULearn were seen as very helpful sources of information and support by many respondents. The latter was an additional forum where lecturers could communicate with students via posting lecture notes or announcements about their degree programme, and many valued this as a useful extension of their academic relationship with the programme staff.

3.7.2 Other university supports

While the majority of the overall sample had heard of university supports such as the Students' Association and Student Mentors the level of awareness of both varied, ranging from being very familiar with the activities they offered to having very limited, or in some cases, no knowledge of their function within the university. A number of students, particularly on the MTE programme commented on the helpful contribution of mentors in their first year in university.

Yeah, we used to get lectures from the student mentors last year, not so much this year. I think it was because last year we were new and it was mentors who had done the course and things like that. So that did help us, but we don't need it this year since we've been since 3rd year. (L366, DE, MTE)

However, many said they had no need to access their support.

With respect to the Students' Association there was little evidence that the former HN students were becoming involved, or accessing any support which they

might provide. Some felt they could not free up time to be involved or it was not an activity they wanted to engage with, particularly those who were juggling university and other commitments.

No I haven't made use of, I know they're on the website and I know you can make use of it, but again just due to my commitments and getting back down the road I'm always up for my classes and then away kind of thing. (L307, DE, Social Sciences)

...we probably in a way get mentored from the apprentices that have come before us I suppose, they do a sort of mentoring, like when we're in work they'll drop in on the Wednesday when we come in they say 'How did you get on yesterday?' or we'll bump into them on the Tuesdays because they're in on a Tuesday as well, so we'll usually bump into them and they'll ask us how we're getting on, if there's anything we need help with and stuff. (L458, p/t DE, Engineering)

3.7.3 Student-to-student support

A main source of support for our respondents was from other students on their degree, either students in general or those who entered from college. While students who entered four year degree programmes were receiving support from a wide range of students, those who had entered the 2+2 programmes were more likely to emphasize supports from others like themselves who entered from college. The part-time Engineering students also emphasized the importance of peer support from other part-time students, including work colleagues in the same year or above.

Section Four

Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1 Conclusions

This study has provided the opportunity to gather data from students on a range of HN programmes who have progressed to degree study in GCU. It has also gathered data from staff involved with these courses in both the colleges and the university. While all of the students have progressed to GCU, many of the issues which emerge, and the conclusions which can be drawn, can be seen to be of much wider relevance.

Nearly all of the respondents in this study reported that they found their HNC/Ds a useful preparation for degree level study, and for many this has provided a route into university which would not otherwise have been available. It also appears that, while many of these students found the initial transition to university difficult, and they experienced problems in adjusting to different

approaches to learning, teaching and assessment, most had settled into university life and were coping with the demands made on them. In this respect the partnerships that have been established between GCU and the colleges have been successful in providing routes to degree level study for many students for whom this would not otherwise have been possible.

However, the research has also highlighted some issues which need to be addressed. It has shown that many students find that they are expected to perform at a higher level in university when compared with college, and that aspects of the approaches to learning, teaching and assessment which they find in college could have prepared them better for this transition. This is, in part, because of the very supportive environment which they find in colleges, and which enables many students who lack confidence to succeed. This then raises a challenge for colleges to consider how they can maintain this supportive environment, while encouraging a more independent and critical approach to learning. This challenge was recognized

by a number of college staff who participated in this study. The issue of the role of HNC/Ds as vocational qualifications, and the possibility of an over-emphasis on preparing students for degree study, was also raised by some staff respondents. While an appropriate balance needs to be struck between different objectives, it seems essential that, on programmes where many, and often most, students wish to progress to degrees, these students should be properly prepared for this transition.

The research has also shown that the experience of transition and integration into university can be a challenging one, particularly for students entering four year degree programmes at Level 3, where student peer groups are already well established. In this respect there is a need to ensure that appropriate arrangements for induction and support are in place.

A further issue which has emerged is the importance of partnership working between staff in colleges and universities to ensure that the curriculum match is as good as

it can be, and that problems for articulating students are identified and resolved where possible. This can also ensure that students are well-informed about the most appropriate opportunities for progression. The work which has been going on under the auspices of GGAP, and the other articulation hubs, is clearly been helpful in this respect, and it is important that it is built upon.

4.2 Recommendations

These recommendations have emerged from this study of students who have progressed from HNC/D programmes in a number of colleges to GCU, however most of them are of a generic nature, and we hope will be seen to be of wider relevance.

4.2.1 Ensuring students have the information for informed decision-making

It is important that HN students have access to the information which they need to make properly informed choices about the most appropriate progression routes. While college staff can have an important role in providing this type

of information for students, it is not clear that they always have accurate and up-to-date information about the best options. This point was acknowledged by college staff. In the light of this we would make the following recommendations.

- It is important that there is effective co-operation between college and university staff to ensure that students receive accurate and up-to-date information about degree programmes, and the opportunities for articulation. Structures which exist through GGAP, and other hubs, to facilitate co-operation should be built upon to achieve this.
- Visits by university staff to colleges to inform students are seen by students as being very helpful and programmes of visits should be established.
- Visits by former students returning to college to report on their own experiences are valued and a programme of visits should be established through the student mentoring scheme.
- The progression database tool developed by GGAP staff is a useful example of the type of resource which can be made

available to students, and more resources of this type should be developed.

4.2.2 Facilitating successful transition from college to university

It is important to recognize that many students find challenging the transition from the relatively small scale and supportive environment of the college to the much larger scale and more formal and impersonal environment of the university. In particular DEs into four year honours programmes, where they are joining student groups who have been on these programmes since Level 1, can find this particularly challenging. While 2+2 programmes can provide a more supportive environment for students, it is important that their needs associated with transition and integration into the life of the university are also recognized. We suggest the following recommendations.

- Induction programmes should be provided for all direct entry students (DEs) to both four year and 2+2 programmes, and students should be actively encouraged to participate.
- In addition to generic induction programmes,

tailored programmes such as the Maths Summer School or Learning Strategies Week can meet particular needs and contribute to familiarization with the university environment, and should be supported or developed.

- While recognizing that former HN students may not wish to be singled out as ‘special cases’, it is important that all tutors are made aware of DE students in their classes, so that they can ensure that they receive any support they need in the early stages of transition.
- Associate Student Schemes have the potential to provide significant benefits for articulating students, but they must be carefully evaluated to ensure that they are advantageous to all students.

4.2.3 Preparing students for successful degree level study

HN students are a more heterogeneous group than the general university undergraduate population. There is a wider age range, many lack the standard university entrance qualifications, and for many this is a ‘second

chance’ route into degree level study. As a result college staff have placed considerable emphasis on providing supportive environments to enable students to gain confidence as successful learners. While recognizing the value and importance of this approach, there are dangers that students are not sufficiently encouraged to develop the learning styles for successful study as degree level students. The following recommendations emerge from our study.

- While the learning and teaching culture in the colleges, should continue to be supportive, it is important that it should encourage learners to be more independent, take more responsibility for their learning, and develop better time management skills.
- Students expressed a need to move beyond the ‘spoon feeding’ and ‘tick box’ approach which many of them said characterized some aspect of learning and teaching within the HNs. Approaches to learning and teaching should encourage the development of skills for critical thinking and analysis.
- Many students reported that

there was little emphasis on referencing in college, and they found themselves at a disadvantage in this respect when they entered university. Greater emphasis should be placed on developing these skills within HN programmes.

- There was evidence from students that the approaches to assessment lacked the rigour which was expected of them as degree students. College staff also recognized that there were opportunities to utilize more fully the range of assessment methods available to them. Students who are progressing to degree level study should be well prepared for the assessment methods they will encounter.

4.2.4 Providing appropriate support within the degree programmes

A number of HN students found the transition from college to university initially difficult. This was particularly an issue for students entering four year honours programmes, rather than 2+2 programmes, and while many seemed to adjust to this new environment, recommendations

can be made regarding possible areas of improvement. This could help reduce the dangers of drop-out among students who are finding the transition difficult.

- It will be important to identify students who appear to be losing contact with their programme at the earliest point, establish the reasons for this, and provide support where possible.
- Despite strenuous efforts, we failed to establish contact with any students who had withdrawn. As a result we have no systematic evidence regarding the factors associated with withdrawal. A further study which focuses on drop-out should be undertaken.

4.2.5 Support from student mentors and the Students' Association

While the majority of respondents had heard of student mentors, and some commented on the valuable source of information, advice and support they provided, particularly at the early stages of transition, many said they had had no contact with them. There was also little evidence that the former HN students were becoming involved

with the Students' Association, or accessing any support which it might provide. We therefore make the following recommendations.

- There is a need to consider how student mentors can be used most effectively to establish an appropriate programme of mentor support for students at all stages of their university experience.
- The Students' Association should be encouraged to consider what level of contact there is with former HN students, and if more could be done to involve them in this aspect of student life.

4.2.6 Ensuring appropriate curriculum matching

In general there was evidence that the curricula of the HNs were providing students with valuable foundations for their degree level studies, and in a number of cases this reflected co-operation between college and university staff to ensure that this fit existed. A number of recommendations emerge to further enhance this fit between the programmes.

- A number of projects are already underway to jointly review programmes under

the auspices of GGAP, other articulation hubs, and SQA. The experience from this work should be built upon to ensure that structures exist to enable college and university staff to co-operate in ensuring that curriculum matching occurs, particularly when relevant programmes are being reviewed in colleges or universities.

- Where problems are identified, e.g. the absence of an introduction to SPSS in the HNC/D in Social Sciences, it is important that staff are made aware, and there are procedures to ensure that they are addressed. Examples exist within the work of GGAP which can be built upon.
- Engineering students reported problems with the level of maths on the HN programme, and it is important that students who plan to progress to degree level study have the opportunity to study maths at an appropriate level.

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APPENDIX

Table 1: Breakdown of current students contacted and interviews conducted by degree programme

Title of degree programme	No of students contacted	No of interviews conducted	Totals %
BA/BA(Hons) Social Sciences	53	19	36
BA/BA (Hons) Social Sciences (Pt)	3	1	33
BA/BA (Hons) Business	20	7	28
BA/BA (Hons) Business (Pt)	10	2	20
BA/BA (Hons) Management, Technology and Enterprise	53	8	15
BSc/BSc (Hons) Audio Technology with Multimedia	32	6	19
BEng/BEng (Hons) Mechanical and Power Plant Systems	4	0	0
BEng/BEng (Hons) Electrical Power Engineering	11	0	0
BEng/BEng (Hons) Electrical Power Engineering (Pt)	5	2	40
BEng/BEng (Hons) Mechanical Electronic Systems Engineering	1	0	0
BEng/BEng (Hons) Mechanical Electronic Systems Engineering (Pt)	8	4	50
BSc/BSc (Hons) Cyber Security and Networks	21	6	29
Totals	221	55	25

Table 2: Breakdown of interviews conducted with current direct/non-direct entrants, their mode of degree study and level of HN entered into degree study by degree programme

Title of degree programme	Direct entrants				Non-direct entrants				Totals
	Full-time	HNC	HND	N	Full-time	HNC	HND	N	N
BA/BA(Hons) Social Sciences	7		4		5		3	1	20
BA/BA (Hons) Business			5			1	1	1	9
BA/BA (Hons) Management, Technology and Enterprise			8						8
BSc/BSc (Hons) Audio Technology with Multimedia			6						6
BEng/BEng (Hons) Electrical Power Engineering				2					2
BEng/BEng (Hons) Mechanical Electronic Systems Engineering				4					4
BSc/BSc (Hons) Cyber Security and Networks			6						6
Totals	7	29	6	1	6	4	2		55



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