Access and Beyond

Supporting Widening Participation Students in Three Scottish Universities

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Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

In Scotland reducing social inequalities in access to Higher Education (HE) is an important focus of policy seen as necessary to achieve greater social justice and social mobility, as well as increasing the talent pool of graduates.

The 2013 Post-16 Education Bill reinforced the duty on universities to recruit and retain more students from disadvantaged backgrounds by including clearly defined targets in the outcome agreements set between the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and individual universities (SFC 2012, Scottish Parliament 2013). Each year since 2012-13 universities have been required to include aims in relation to widening access and articulation from college in the outcome agreements they agree as a condition of their grant from the SFC.

Successive governments have supported a range of interventions to widen access and increase participation including the development of articulation routes to degree study via sub-degree Higher National qualifications (HN), the Schools for Higher Education Programme (SHEP) and the use of contextual data in HE admissions. All three are relevant to this research and reflected in the students groups involved.

Articulation from HN to degree study has been a central feature of government policy especially from the publication of the SFC's strategy for access 'Learning for All' in 2005 (SFC 2005). The term articulation refers specifically to students who have a Higher National qualification gaining entry to the second or third year of a degree programme: second year for those who have a Higher National Certificate (HNC) and third year for those with a Higher National Diploma (HND). Most recently, the Commission on Widening Access recognised the contribution of the HN articulation route in widening access while pointing out the need to move beyond existing practices and targets (SG 2016).

The Schools for Higher Education Programme (SHEP) is funded by the SFC and provides support to secondary schools across Scotland that have low progression rates to higher education at college or university. It aims to Increase progression rates through a programme of activities to targeted pupils from S3–S6, to help them consider higher education as a viable option, provide information and advice and prepare them for studying at this level. Activities include school-based workshops, college and university campus-based activities and conferences.

The contextual measure emphasized by the Scottish Government is based on the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). SIMD identifies those data zones in Scotland suffering from multiple deprivation, these are combined to produce a single ranking of small areas

based on their overall level of deprivation and usually grouped into deciles or quintiles (Scottish Government, 2016). HE policies typically focus on the most deprived 20% (SIMD20) and 40% (SIMD40). The SIMD characteristics of students is a key indicator for the SFC in its assessment of progress on widening participation (SFC 2016) and the Commission on Widening Access has set ambitious targets for Scottish universities to achieve in terms of the proportion of students from SIMD 20 backgrounds whom they accept (SG 2016).

The study

This research investigates the experience of students from Widening Participation (WP) backgrounds in their first year of university study. It focuses on their awareness and use of the formal and informal support and the extent to which it meets their needs. For some students their first year of study was not their first year of university but their second or third year.

 It was commissioned as part of the Scottish Funding Council's Impact for Access programme. The project was led by Heriot Watt University in collaboration with Edinburgh Napier University and Queen Margaret University.

The WP groups of interest were specified as:

- entrants who gained an HNC/D from a Scottish college and who articulated into year 2 or 3 of degree study;
- students living in neighbourhoods defined as being in the two most deprived quintiles of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (ie SIMD20/40 postcodes);
- those who attended a school in the Schools for Higher Education Programme (SHEP);
- and individuals previously or currently in care.

It was decided to include students from non-WP backgrounds to enable the project to compare the transition of WP students and their non WP counterparts and to explore whether there are differences in their experience, perceptions and use of available support.

Although the intention was to focus on HN qualified students who had articulated, a number of respondents to the survey who had HN qualifications had, in fact, started their degree in first year i.e. had not articulated. They have been included in the study and HN students' year of entry taken account of in the analyses.

It should be noted that we are interested in students' transition and transition support *throughout* their first year of degree study and not simply their immediate transition in the first few weeks of the academic year.

The overall aims of the research were to:

- investigate the effectiveness of personal tutoring and other formal and informal systems in supporting the transition of new undergraduate students from WP and non-WP backgrounds.
- identify examples of good practice in addressing the support needs of WP students or gaps in provision provided by the institutions involved. Examples may be specific to the WP group or offered to all students
- produce an authoritative set of findings and recommendations to guide future activities around transition support for WP students.

Methodology

There were two main elements to the research: an on-line survey of students in their first year of study at each of the three Universities and a programme of in-depth interviews with a selected number of respondents in each University. These were supplemented by interviews with two members of staff in each of the Universities to provide background contextual information.

This research partially overlapped with a related study carried out for ELRAH (the Edinburgh, Lothians, Fife and Borders Regional Articulation Hub) (Howieson 2016). Chart A shows the coverage of each of these studies and the elements that contributed to both research projects.

The survey
The survey was internet-based, designed using SurveyGizmo software and can be seen at http://www.surveygizmo.com/s3/2605589/gettingon-support[1].

Each university sent emails with the survey link directly to all eligible students in their institution as well as using other avenues to promote it such as inclusion on electronic noticeboards; on the VLE and messages on Facebook. A prize draw for Amazon vouchers was highlighted to students to encourage participation. The survey was live online over March-April 2016. Reminder emails were sent out over this period.

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[1] To enable all questions to be viewed, the filtering that respondents saw have been removed and all questions are now on a single sheets; this has affected the numbering of the questions.

Chart A: Overlaps between the ELRAH and SFC Impact for Access studies

Elrah Study			SFC Study	
Cohort 1	**Cohort 2**		**Cohort 1 plus non HN students**	
HN/AS at uni 2015-16 (previously college 2014-15)	HN/AS at college 2015-16		HN/AS plus non-HN at uni 2015-16	
↕	↕		↗ ↘	
Survey 1	**Survey 2**		**Survey**	**Interviews**
Part 1: covered previous experience at college	Covered current experience at college		Version 1: covered HN/AS experience at uni	
Part 2: covered current experience at uni			Version 2 covered non HN experience at uni	Ints with HN/AS students at uni / Ints with non-HN students at uni

Shaded areas indicate activities that contributed to both research projects

A total of 473 students completed the survey, an overall response rate of 9%, while disappointing this is not uncommon for web based surveys of students (Smyth and Pearson 2011; Conrad et al 2010). Within this overall response rate, however, a higher proportion of former HN students responded than did their non HN counterparts (HN: 18% v non HN 7%, Table 1). Table 1 also illustrates the variation in response rates across the participating Universities especially in respect of non HN students[2].

Table 1 Survey response rate: HN and non HN qualified students (%)

	HN response %	Non HN response %
All	18	7
Uni 1	22	14
Uni 2	17	3
Uni 3	17	8

In relation to the four WP categories of interest noted above, 39% of respondents had HNC/D qualifications. Not all of them had actually articulated (ie entered second or second or third year), 16% of HN had, in fact, started in first year. It is also evident from students' comments in the survey that some with an HND had actually entered second rather than third year but we do not have figures for this.

Just under a quarter were from SIMD20/40 postcodes (24%). There is overlap between the two categories: 27% of HN qualified respondents came from SIMD 20/40 postcodes but this did vary considerably across the three universities, in particular, almost a half of HN students at University 1 had a SIMD20/40 postcode (48%, table 2).

Table 2 Percentage of HN respondents from SIMD 20/40 at each university

	survey respondents: *HN qualified from SIMD 20/40* %
All	24
Uni 1	48
Uni 2	21
Uni 3	31

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[2] In reporting the findings we do not refer to the participating Universities by name

Only four respondents identified themselves as care leavers so we are unable to comment on this WP group in the report. The number of respondents to the survey who had attended a SHEP school was 22, this means comparisons between them and other students are not feasible since any difference is very unlikely to be statistically significant ie they could be as much the result of chance as indicating any real difference. However, a number of students from SHEP schools were included in the interview element of the research so we have been able to gain insights into their experience.

Virtually all respondents were studying on a full-time basis (99%). Most identified themselves as White Scottish or British (79%), another 10% stated White European and the remaining 11% of respondents came from a range of Asian or Asian British, Black or Black British or mixed ethnic backgrounds. The very small numbers in all but the White Scottish or British categories means it is not feasible to analyse ethnicity and HN status or postcode. The age profile of HN and non HN qualified respondents varied: most of the HN group were in their 20s (71%) while the majority of the non HN students were under 20 (72%).

How far does the survey reflect the student population?

An important consideration is the extent to which respondents to the survey can be regarded as representative of the relevant student population at each of the Universities. In a web based survey of this type, achieving a truly representative sample is not possible but it is helpful to be aware of any likely bias in the respondents.

Research on non-response in surveys of higher education students indicates that those who respond are generally characterised by high performance and achievement (eg Adams and Umbach 2011). Applying this to the present study, it suggests that the survey may not fully represent the experience of students who have been less successful in their first year of degree study. This should be borne in mind when considering its findings: they are more likely to underestimate rather than overestimate issues or difficulties encountered by students. Relatedly, it should be remembered that, given the timing of the survey in March-April, it does not capture the experience of students who had discontinued at an earlier point in the academic year.

Focusing on students who have an HN qualification, one of the main groups of interest in the research, table 3 shows that the gender balance of respondents was reasonably similar to that of the HN qualified students population at each of the Universities. This is especially so at University 1 where 52% of HN respondents were male compared with 50% of the HN student population there. At University 2, male HN students are slightly under- represented in the survey and females over-represented while the reverse is the case at University 3.

Table 3 Gender of HN respondents and of HN student population (%)

	HN survey respondents (%)	HN student population (%)
Uni 1		
Male	52	50
Female	48	50
Uni 2		
Male	46	53
Female	54	47
Uni 3		
Male	13	24
Female	84	76

In relation to age, HN qualified students who responded to the survey tended to be older than the overall HN student population at each University (table 4).

Table 4 Age of HN qualified respondents and of HN student population (%)

HN Qualified Students	Uni 1 %	Uni 2 %	Uni 3 %
Under 20			
Survey respondents	14	7	6
Student population	18	23	41
20-24			
Survey respondents	50	50	50
Student population	79	48	41
25-29			
Survey respondents	25	18	25
Student population	3	15	18
30+			
Survey respondents	11	25	19
Student population	-	15	8

At University 1, a smaller proportion of HN survey respondents were aged 20 – 24 compared with the HN student population there (50% v 79%, table 4) and more likely to be 25 and over. At Universities 2 and 3 the main difference is that only a small proportion of HN qualified students aged under 20 years old completed the survey. At University 2, 23% of HN students were under 20 but only 7% of respondents were in this age bracket. Under 20s

make up a large minority of the HN students at University 3 (41%) but this is not reflected in the age profile of the HN respondents where only 6% were under 20.

Considering the other key group of interest in the research - those from SIMD 20/40 - the SIMD status of those who completed the survey[3] is a reasonable reflection of the SIMD profile of the overall student population in each of the Universities. The proportion of survey respondents from SIMD20/40 is almost the same as that for the student population at University 1 (respondents: 24% v all: 25%, table 5). It is slightly lower at University 2 but still close to the overall figure (respondents: 21% v all: 25%). In contrast, in University 3, the proportion of respondents from SIMD 20/40 postcodes is somewhat higher than that of the overall student population (respondents: 33% v all: 24%).

Table 5 SIMD status of respondents and of student population (%)

	Survey respondents: SIMD 20/40 (%)	Student population: SIMD 20/40 (%)
Uni 1	24	25
Uni 2	21	25
Uni 3	33	24

The interviews

Respondents to the survey were asked if they would be willing in principle to take part in follow-up interviews if selected and 39% agreed to this. The likelihood of students volunteering to take part in the interviews did not vary by gender, SIMD postcode or whether or not they were HN qualified.

Students were selected from the list of volunteers to represent:

- a range of experience as indicated by their response to the question *'Has the move to degree study been easier or more difficult than you expected?'*
- the three main WP groups (HN qualified; SIMD20/40 postcode; having attended a SHEP school) and also the non-WP category.

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[3] respondents were asked to give the postcode of the area they were living in before they started university to enable the SIMD to be calculated. Although most did give a postcode, in some cases it was only a partial one so that it was not possible to determine their SIMD. Overall 66% of respondents were able to be assigned to a SIMD quintile.

The selected students were contacted by telephone and email and were offered the choice of face-to-face, telephone or Skype interviews either during the day or in the early evening. Carrying out the interviews proved to be time consuming process since a number of students who had agreed did not attend for interview or were not available when telephoned. In some instances, it took several follow-up emails or telephone calls to manage to re-arrange and carry out the interview. The face-to-face interviews were held at the University attended by the student and travel expenses covered as appropriate.

The interviews were semi-structured to ensure comparability across the interviews while allowing sufficient flexibility to tailor the interview to the particular circumstances and experiences of each interviewee (see appendix 1 for a copy of the interview guide).

A total of 34 students were interviewed: 24 face-to-face and 10 by telephone. There was an even gender split. Interviewees comprised:

- 19 HN qualified students: one first year; 11 second year; seven 3rd year
- five students who had attended a SHEP school
- three students who been on a Scottish Wider Access Programme course (SWAP)[4]
- seven students with standard entry qualifications.

We have information on the postcodes of 26 of the interviewees and of these nine were from SIMD 20/40 backgrounds (mainly SIMD 20).

The degree courses of the interviewees were:

- Accounting and Business/ Accounting and Corporate Finance;
- Architectural Technology;
- Biology/Biological Sciences/Biology and Biotechnology;
- Chemical Engineering;
- Civil Engineering;
- Construction Management;
- Criminology;
- Dietetics
- Interactive/Digital media design
- Drama
- Music
- Nursing
- Physics
- Physiotherapy

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[4] The Scottish Wider Access Programme provides courses at college for adult learners to prepare them for entry to degree courses at partner universities or higher level qualifications at college.

The next chapter reports on the findings of the survey of students to provide an overview of the experience of the different student groups in their first year of study, the extent to which they used support provision and their views on it. The following three chapters then explore these issues in greater depth drawing on the interviews with students and paying particular attention to their views on how their support could be developed. The final chapter aims to sum up the key findings from the study and consider their implications for universities and how best they can support widening participation and other students in their transition to degree study.

Chapter 2: Findings from the student survey

This chapter reports the survey results. As noted in the previous chapter, the two WP groups who responded in sufficient numbers to enable analysis were HN qualified entrants and students from SIMD 20/40 postcodes. Analysis has therefore focused on these two groups, in particular, comparing their experience with that of other students: HN qualified compared with non-HN qualified students, and students from the most deprived neighbourhoods (SIMD 20/40) compared with others from more affluent areas.

Throughout this chapter, where differences between the responses of the various student groups are noted as being 'significant', this means they are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.

Students' experience of degree study

Mixed views on the move to degree study

Students were asked if they had found the move to degree study easier or more difficult than they had expected. HN qualified entrants were considerably more likely than other students to have experienced the move as more difficult than they had anticipated (HN 44% vs non HN 18%, table 1) and the difference was statistically significant. There were no significant differences across the universities in either HN or non-HN students' responses.

A substantial minority of both HN and non-HN students responded that they 'didn't know what to expect' of their move to degree study but non HN qualified entrants were significantly more likely to give this answer (HN: 25% vs non HN 38%). This is a theme that emerged from the interviews with non HN students and will be considered further in the next chapter.

Figure 1 Views on the move to degree study: HN vs non HN students (%)
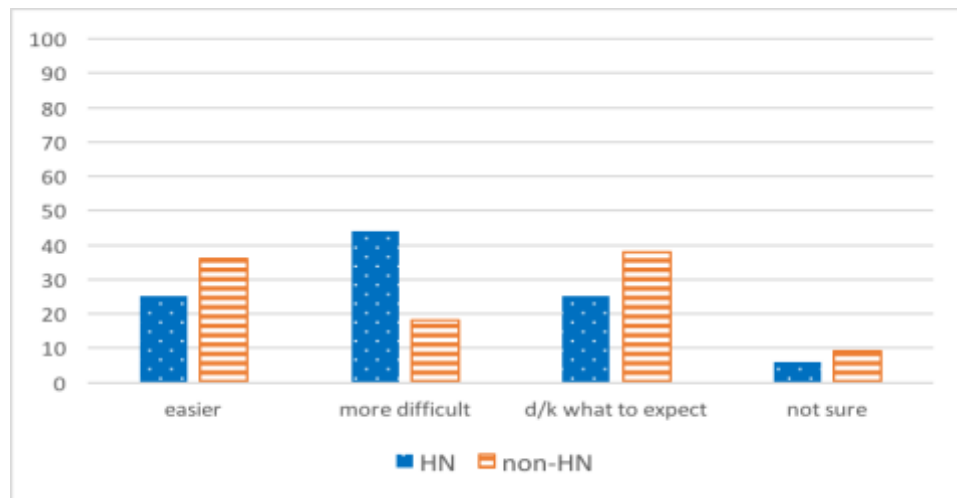
Looking more closely at the experience of HN qualified students, the year at which they started their degree makes a statistically significant difference to their responses (fig 2). Those who had gone into second and, especially, those who had entered third year were considerably more likely to have found the move more difficult than their HN counterparts who had started their degree in first year. Nevertheless even those who had started in first year were more likely than non-HN students to experience the move to degree as more difficult than expected (1st yr HN:28% vs non HN:18%). It appears that HN students as a whole find the transition to degree study more difficult than expected compared with non HN students and the issue is especially acute for those who articulate or enter with advanced progression.

Figure 2 HN students' views on the move to degree study by year of entry to degree (%)
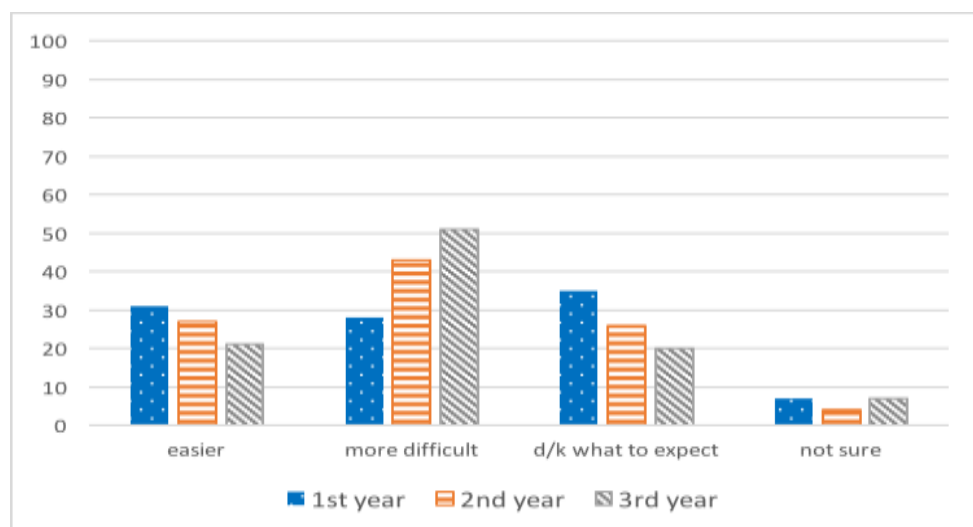
Students' background in terms of their SIMD status made no significant differences to their views on the move to degree study.

Areas that students found <u>particularly</u> difficult

To try and get a more detailed picture of students' experience, they were asked if they had encountered any **particular** difficulty in relation to different aspects of university study and life since they had started university. By asking about 'particular' areas of difficulty, the questions aimed to focus them on the areas where they were having substantial problems in a situation where most students starting university can find various aspects of degree study a challenge and somewhat difficult. In interpreting the results, it is therefore important to bear in mind the emphasis of the question on 'particular difficulty' not simply 'any difficulty'. Although in all but one area, less than half of students reported having experienced 'particular difficulty', the issue for the institutions is whether the proportions who did have particular difficulty is acceptable given that the students are referring to a substantial difficulty.

HN and non HN qualified entrants

Looking at Figure 3, the broad pattern of response from HN and non HN students is similar in terms of the areas identified as being especially difficult and in the proportion of students identifying them as such. Not knowing about a subject other students had already done, the extent of independent study and work being harder than expected were among the main areas of difficulty identified by all students. Finance too was an issue for both student groups.

Focusing on the areas in Figure 3 concerning teaching, learning and assessment (ie excluding the areas of travel and finance[5]) 85% of respondents reported experiencing particular difficulty with at least one area. There was no significant difference between HN and non HN students.

Comparing HN and non HN students' responses to each of the areas in Figure 3, there were three aspects of degree study which HN qualified students were significantly more likely to find difficult than their non HN qualified counterparts:

  ° the type and level of assessment on their degree course (HN 33% v non HN 23%)
  ° the type of teaching at university (HN 31% v non HN 24%)
  ° finance (HN 44% v non HN 33%).

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[5] If the areas of travel and finance are included the proportion rises to 88%.

In relation to finance, it may be that as an older group of students, HN qualified students may have more financial commitments than the younger non HN student group[6]. The Independent Student Bursary is smaller than the Young Student Bursary and some of the older students may be ineligible for a bursary, for example, if they are living with a partner. It may also be that the extent of support from parents varies depending on age.

Figure 3: Areas of <u>particular</u> difficulty: HN vs non HN qualified entrants (%)

Question was: "*Since starting university have you had **particular** difficulties in relation to …*"
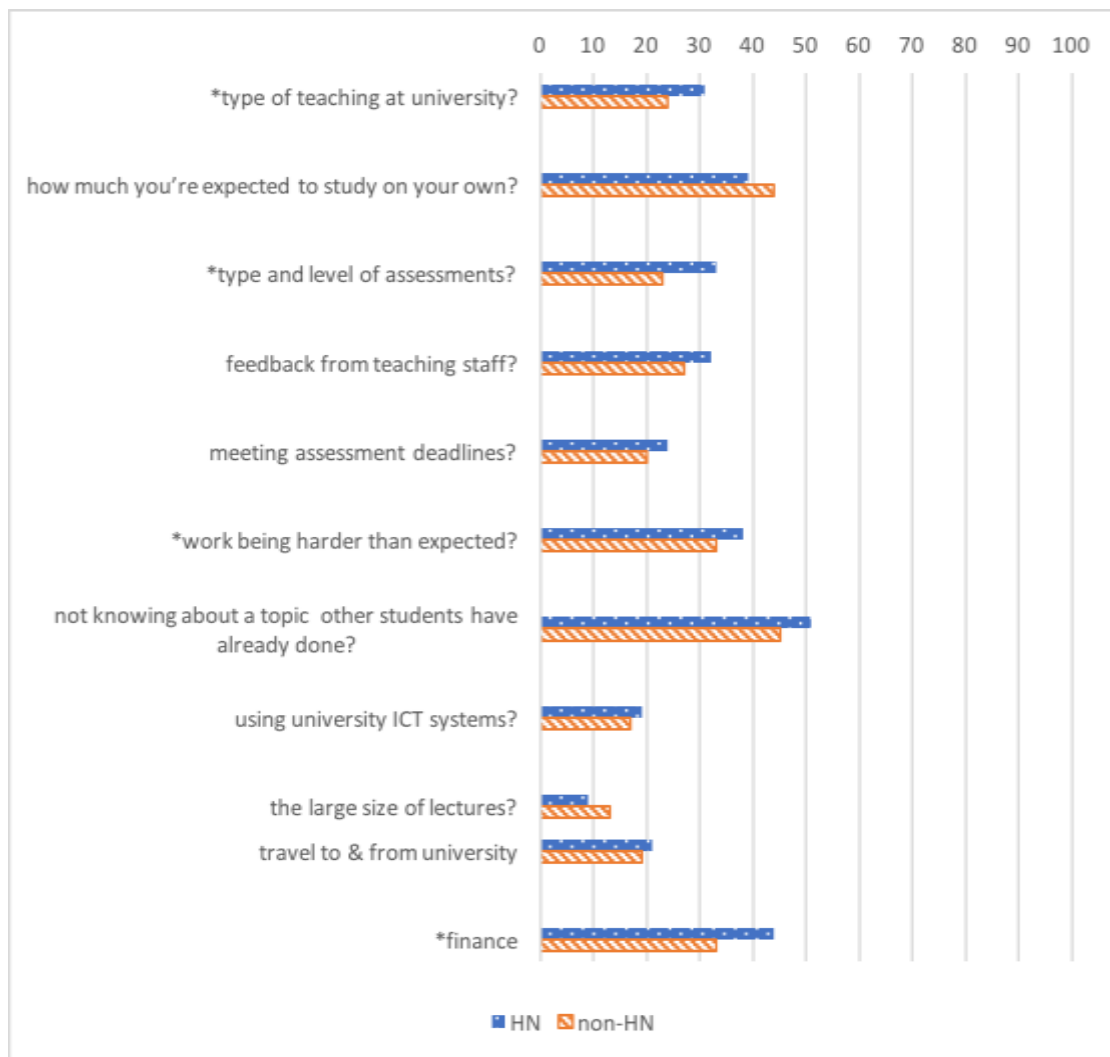
* *Asterisked items show statistically significant differences between the two groups at the 95% confidence level*

There were no significant differences across the three Universities in HN student's responses. However, when their year of entry to their degree is taken into account, the

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[6] 72% of non HN students were aged under 20 years old compared with 9% of HN students

picture is somewhat different. Year of entry is a vital factor in HN qualified students' experience of degree study and is an issue that students raised in their survey comments and in interview.

Direct entrants, especially those who had gone straight into the third year of their degree were significantly more likely to have encountered difficulties with several of aspects of degree study than first year HN entrants. This is the case in respect of:

- not knowing about a topic other students have already done (HN students: 1st 34%; 2nd 51%; 3rd 56%)

- work being harder than expected (HN students: 1st 28%; 2nd 43%; 3rd 46%)

and for 3rd year entrants:

- type and level of assessment on their degree course (HN students: 1st 34%; 2nd 21%; 3rd 43%)

Further analysis that specifically compared the responses of HN students who started in first year with non HN students (ie also first year entrants) found only one significant difference and this was in respect of the type and level of assessment on their degree course. A higher proportion of HN first years identified this as a particular difficulty (1st yr HN 34% v non HN 23%).

Areas of difficulty for students from SIMD 20/40 and from other areas

Students from the most deprived areas appear more likely to experience particular difficulties in a number of aspects of degree study than their counterparts from less disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

A considerably higher proportion of students from SIMD 20/40 postcodes identified the extent of independent study required as particularly difficult than students from more affluent areas (fig 4: SIMD 20/40: 51% v others 37%). Similarly, the type of teaching at university was more likely to have been an issue for them (SIMD 20/40 35% v others 23%). With respect to both these areas of difficulty, whether or not students from SIMD20/40 neighbourhoods had an HN qualification was not a significant factor[7]. Students from the more disadvantaged areas were also more likely to struggle with the type and level of assessments (35 v 23%) as well as the large size of lectures (19% v 9%). In both cases, having an HN qualification had a negative effect over and above their SIMD 20/40 status[8].

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[7] This was examined using logistic regression modelling

[8] Indicated in a logistic regression model.

Figure 4: Areas of particular difficulty: students from SIMD 20/40 vs other postcodes (%)
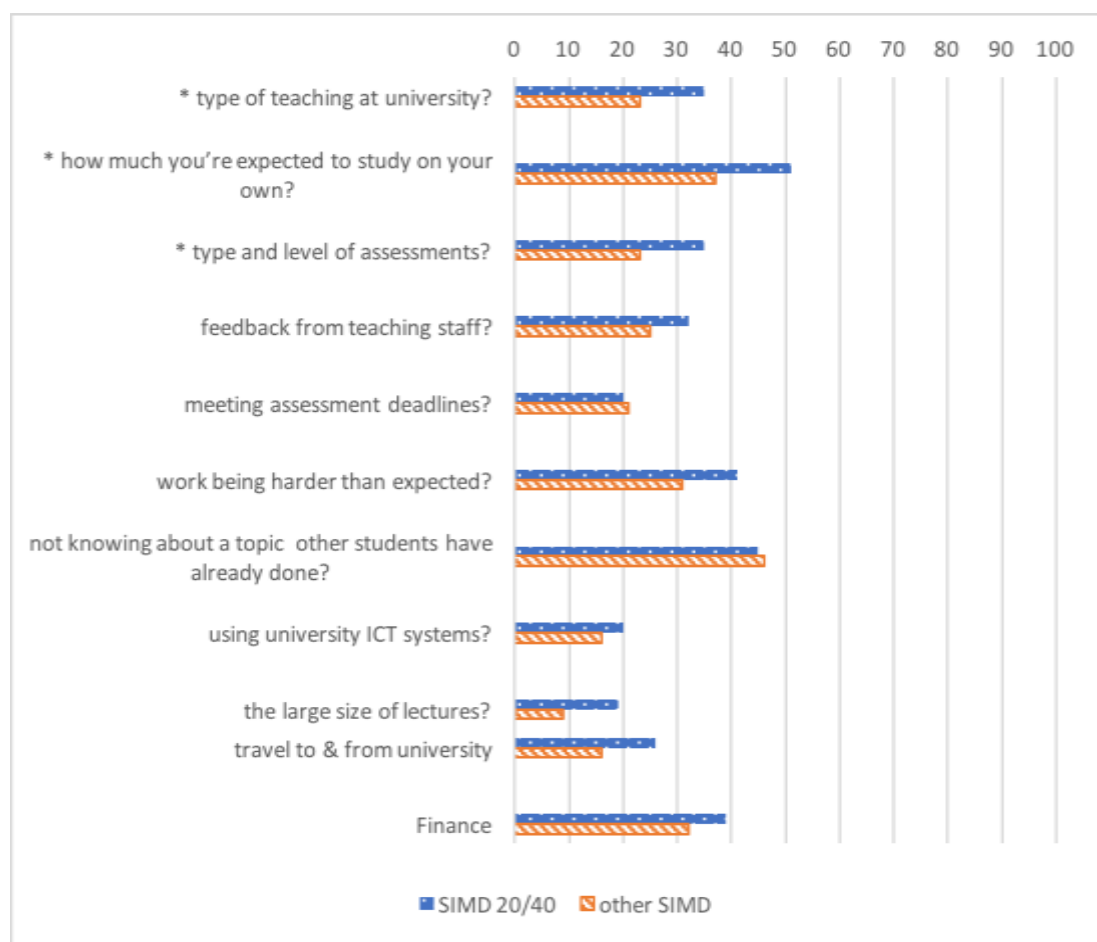
Asterisked items show statistically significant differences between the two groups at the 95% confidence level

Travel to and from university was a further aspect where there was a significant difference in the responses of students from the most deprived neighbourhoods compared with students from other areas (26% v 16%). It could be argued that this may be partly explained by the fact that students from SIMD 20/40 backgrounds were more likely to be living in the family home during the academic year (49% v 30%) and less likely to be in university accommodation (fig 3: 23% v 43%) Nevertheless, this cannot be the full explanation since as figure 6 shows HN students were also more likely to be staying in the family home and, in particular, not to be in university accommodation than their non HN counterparts but there is little difference in the responses of these two groups about travel problems.

Figure 5: Term time living arrangements: students from SIMD 20/40 postcodes vs other postcodes (%)
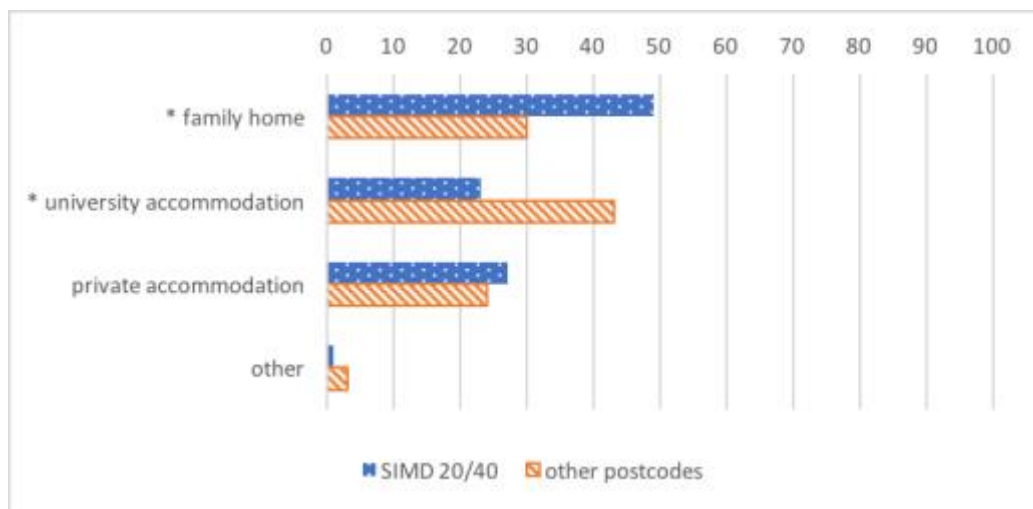
* Asterisked items show statistically significant differences between the two groups at the 95% confidence level

Figure 6: Term time living arrangements: Hn vs non HN students (%)
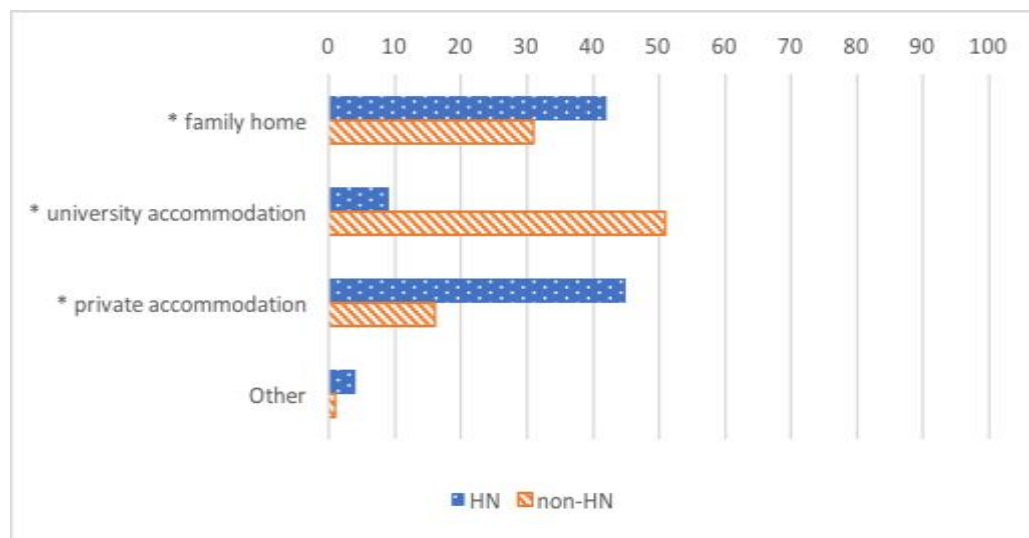
There was very little difference in the responses of SIMD 20/40 students across the three universities about the extent of difficulties they had encountered. The only aspect concerned meeting assessment deadlines; in this case higher proportion of students from SIMD 20/40 backgrounds at University 2 identified this as a difficulty compared with SIMD 20/40 students elsewhere (Uni 2: 36% v Uni 1:13%; Uni 3: 7%).

Further analysis investigated whether having an HN made any difference to the responses of students from areas of deprivation. There was, in fact, only one aspect where this mattered: SIMD 20/40 students who were HN qualified were more likely than their non HN qualified

counterparts to report finance as a particular problem (SIMD 20/40 HN; 52% v SIMD 20/40 non HN 30%).

Integration with other students and staff

Making friends is one of the common concerns of students starting university. Apart from the social aspect, friends are probably the most important sources of support to students in their academic studies. More than two-fifths of HN qualified students had found getting to know other students socially fairly or very difficult, this compares with under a third of other students (fig 7: HN 44% v non HN 30%). Integrating into classes with other students was also more of an issue for HN than for non HN students (HN 26% v non HN 15%). These differences are unsurprising given that most of the HN students as direct entrants were having to try and integrate into existing peer groups. Responses to the question about contributing in tutorials etc did not vary significantly between the two groups of students.

Figure 7 If difficulty integrating with other students and staff: HN and non HN students: (% fairly/very difficult)
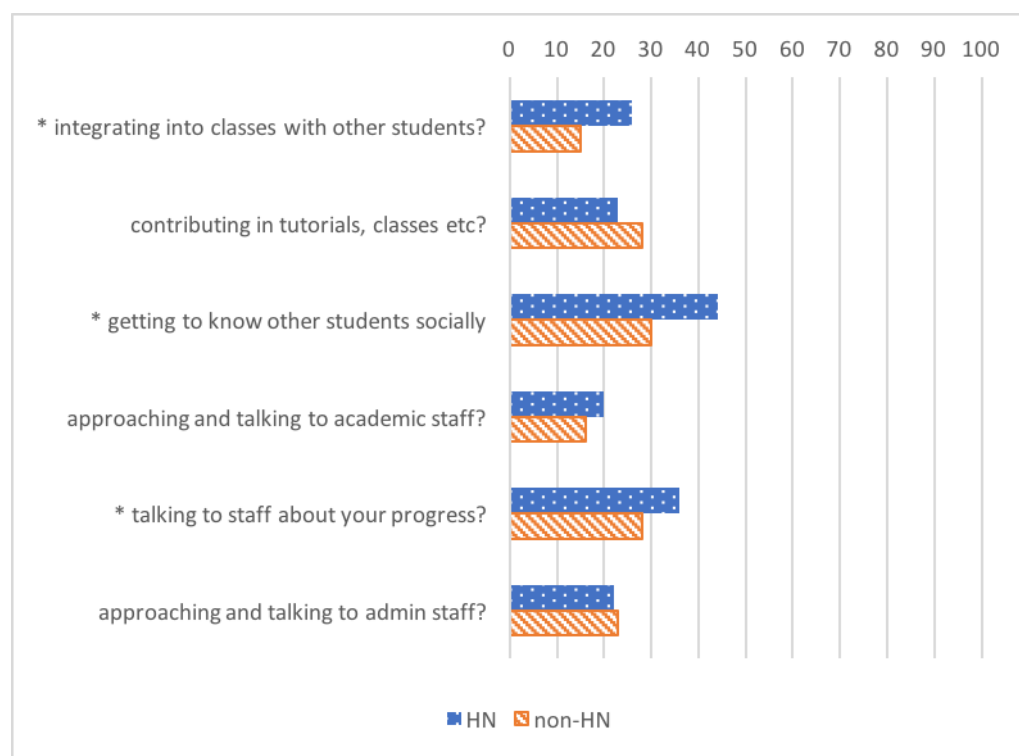
Asterisked items show statistically significant differences between the two groups at the 95% confidence level

Approaching and talking to academic staff did not figure highly as an area that either student group found difficult. However, talking to staff more specifically about their progress was a different matter: a higher proportion of both groups had difficulty with this

compared with simply talking to academic staff. It was more of a problem for HN qualified students than their non HN peers (fig 7: HN 36% v non HN 28%). Surprisingly, the year of entry of HN qualified students did not make a significant difference to their responses.

Students' SIMD status did not have a significant effect on their responses to this set of questions about integration into university life: the results for students from SIMD 20/40 postcodes and from more affluent areas were similar. When being HN qualified or not was taken into account as well as SIMD status, the only significant variation that emerged was that SIMD 20/40 students who were HN qualified were more likely to find talking to staff about their progress difficult compared with non HN qualified students from SIMD 20/40 postcodes (SIMD 20/40 HN 35% v SIMD 20/40 non HN 15%).

Comments made by students suggested that age might be a factor in how well they were able to interact with other students and staff and this proved to the case in the analysis. The age of the student made a difference in four of the six items in this question. In particular, older students were more likely to report that getting to know other students socially was difficult, this was the case for around a half of those aged 25 and over compared with around a third of younger students (fig. 8). This applied to both HN and non HN qualified students. It is not possible to examine if age or year of entry made a difference to HN students' responses because of small numbers.

Figure 8 If difficulty integrating with other students and staff by age (% fairly/very difficult)

Asterisked items show statistically significant differences between the four groups at the 95% confidence level

Students' experience of support provision

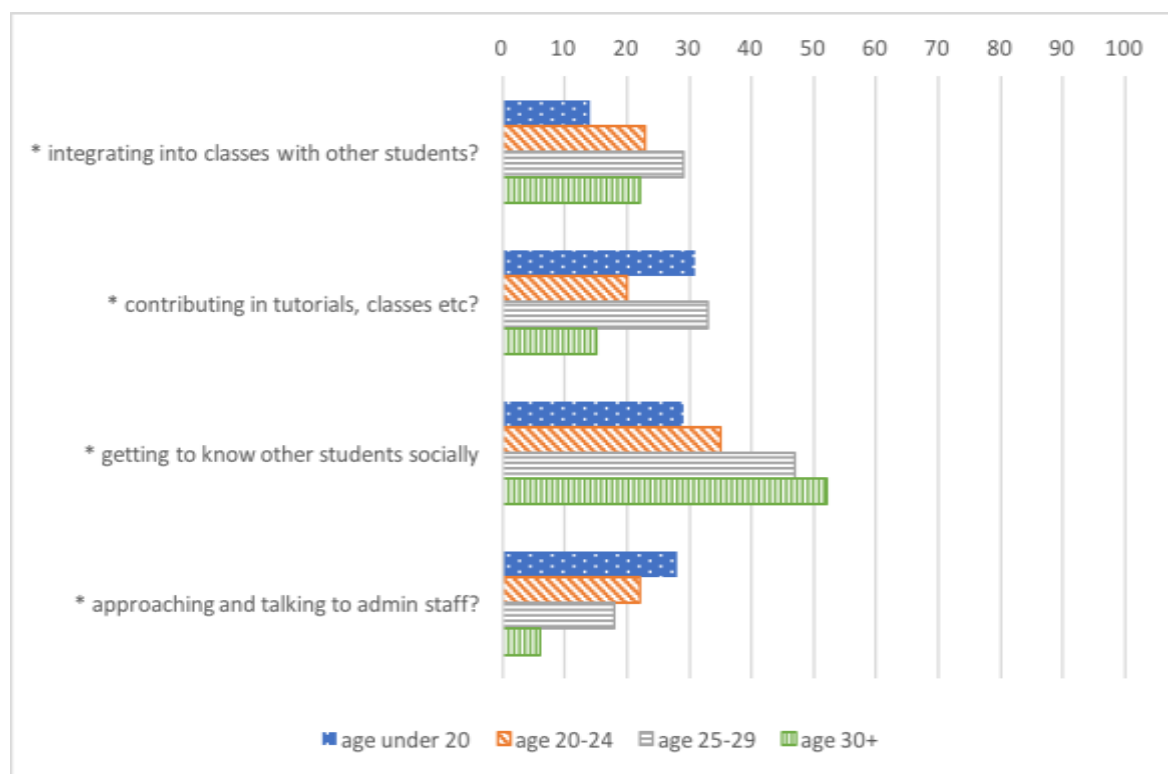Universities offer a range of provision and services to support students' transition, retention and progression and this section examines students' use and opinion of such support.

Universities organise induction programmes before the beginning of the academic year to provide the essential information and advice required by new students to prepare them for their studies, familiarise them with the university and its facilities and begin to get to know their fellow students.

A key feature of student support provision in universities is the personal tutor system. It is common for students to be allocated a personal tutor as part of the induction process and subsequently students and personal tutors are expected to have regular contact throughout students' time at university. A variety of other provision is available to students such as academic skills/effective learning support, peer mentoring, disability support, counselling, careers and employability some of which may be provided by the student union. Access to these services is generally based on self-referral although personal tutors and other staff may suggest and encourage students to make use of them.

Of course, for many students informal support from other students, friends and family plays an important role but some may have less back-up than others depending on their family circumstances and the extent of their academic and social integration in their course, programme area or institution. The survey asked about such informal support as well as institutional provision.

How helpful was induction?

We were interested in how helpful students thought their induction had proved to be for them, especially in relation to any areas they found difficult. Opinion of induction among both HN qualified and non HN students was generally positive with a majority responding that it had been helpful to them subsequently (table 6 HN: 56%; non HN: 60%) In both student groups, the others were fairly evenly divided between those who judged it as 'not helpful' and those who 'not sure'. Year of entry made no difference to the HN qualified students' opinion of their induction nor did the University attended.

Similarly, irrespective of whether students were from SIMD 20/40 or other postcodes, a majority of both groups rated their induction as helpful and the others either judged it not helpful or were unsure (table 7).

Table 6 If induction helpful: HN vs non HN qualified students (%)

If induction events been helpful?	HN %	Non HN %
Helpful	56	60
Not helpful	22	19
Not sure	22	21
N	(186)	(287)

Table 7 If induction helpful: by SIMD status (%)

If induction events been helpful?	SIMD 20/40 %	Other SIMD %
Helpful	61	57
Not helpful	19	23
Not sure	20	20
N	(75)	(236)

Overall, students' opinion of their induction programme was very similar with no significant variations evident.

Students' experience of the personal tutor system

As noted above, the personal tutor system is a central element of student support. The terminology used to refer to this role varies across universities but the basic principle is the same: each student is assigned to a member of academic staff who acts as their first point of contact for academic matters and, in some institutions, personal issues, to advise them about their academic progress and to alert or refer them to other support services in the university as appropriate. The precise arrangements differ across institutions (and sometimes within institutions) but students and personal tutors are expected to have regular contact. In the report, the term 'personal tutor' is used to refer to this post in each of the Universities. In the next sections we consider how the personal tutor system was operating in practice for the survey respondents.

Had students met with their personal tutor?

It appears that the personal tutor system is not working in practice for HN qualified students. Less than a half of the HN respondents had met their personal tutor during their first semester of study at university (45%). Almost a third had not met him/her but what is striking is that almost a fifth did not know that they had a personal tutor (19%). In contrast,

a considerably higher proportion of non HN qualified students had met with their personal tutor (72%) and they were also more likely to know that they did have one. Nevertheless, almost a quarter of non HN qualified students had not met up with their PT (24%).

Figure 9 If met personal tutor during first semester: HN vs non HN students
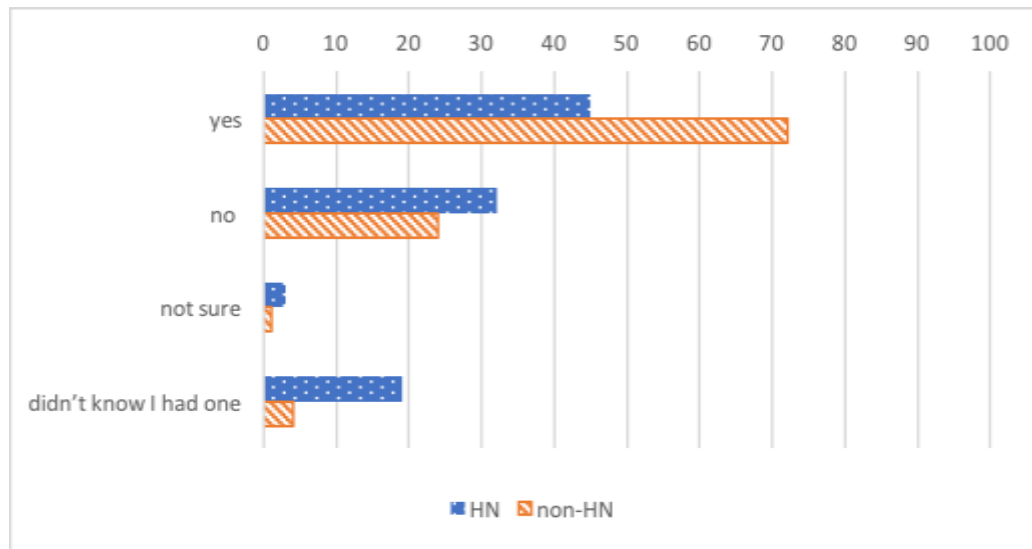
Two factors seem to be at work in relation to the likelihood that students would meet with their PT or at least know that they had one:

- ° for HN qualified students, the key issue is their year of entry to their degree studies.
- ° for both HN and non HN students, the University attended is critical.

Whether or not HN qualified students knew they had a PT and whether they had met him/her was significantly related to their year of entry. First year HN qualified entrants were more likely to know that they had a personal tutor, only 3% did not compared with 16% of second year entrants and 27% of those who had gone straight into third year. HN students who had entered first year were by far more likely to have met their personal tutor than were second or third year entrants (1st: 72% vs 2nd: 37% and 3rd: 43%).

The arrangements that the universities are making to provide information and contact with personal tutors, usually as part of their induction programme, appear to be working to some extent for first years HN entrants but are not effective for those who go straight into second or thirds year of their degree. These figures indicate that direct entrants are missing out on information about the personal tutor system and on the opportunity to have a meeting.

Figure 10 HN students: if met personal tutor during first semester: year of entry
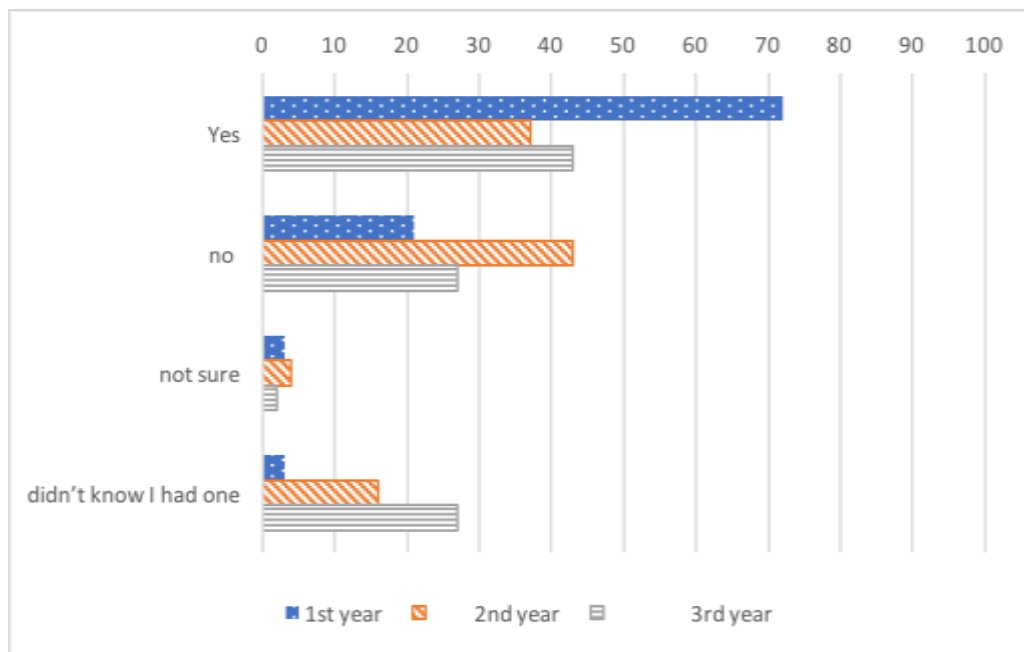
For both HN and non HN qualified students the picture varies depending on which University they were attending.

Students in University 1 were most likely to be aware that they had a personal tutor and to have met with him/her and this applies to those who are HN and non HN qualified. There were no significant differences between HN and non HN students at University 2 in awareness or in the likelihood of having met their PT but only a minority had actually done so. In contrast, at University 3 there was a substantial difference in the proportion of HN and non HN qualified students who knew that they had a PT and who had met with him/her.

Figure 11: If met personal tutor during first semester by University
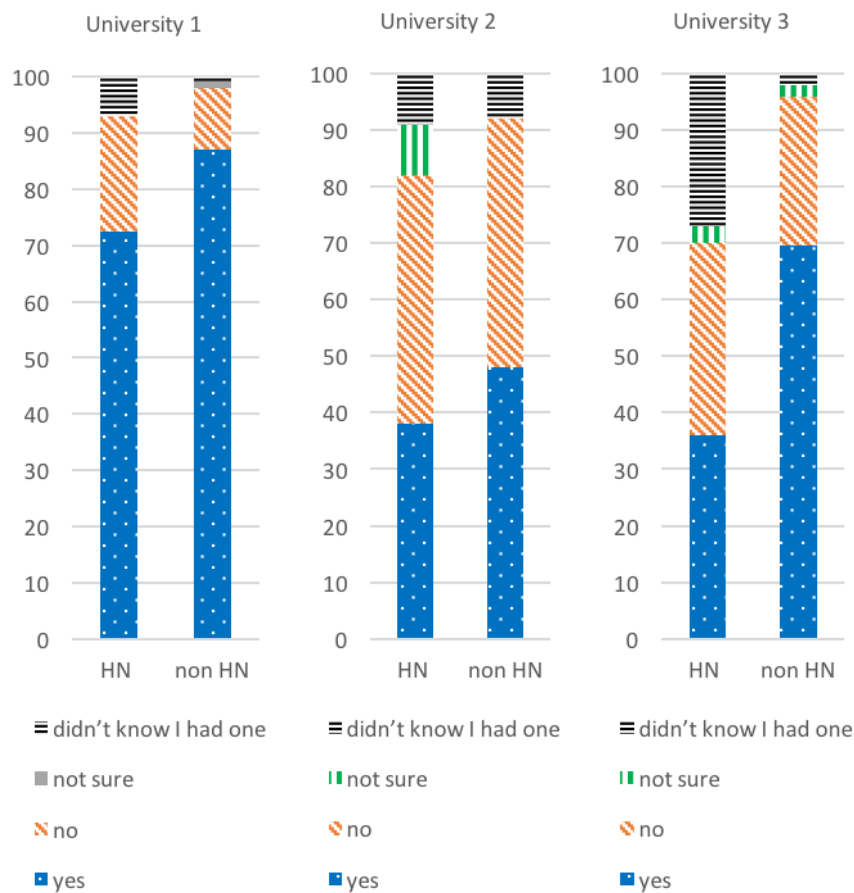
Students from SIMD 20/40 and other postcodes

Overall, the likelihood of students from SIMD 20/40 postcodes meeting their PT or at least knowing that they had one was not significantly different from that of students from other neighbourhoods (fig 12).

However, if students from SIMD 20/40 postcode areas had an HN qualification this made a difference to their responses (fig 13). Those who had an HN were both less likely to know they had a personal tutor (14% v 2% respectively) and to have had a meeting with him/her (SIMD 20/40 & HN: 52% v SIMD 20/40 & non-HN: 83%).

Figure 12 If met personal tutor during first semester: students from SIMD 20/40 and from other postcodes
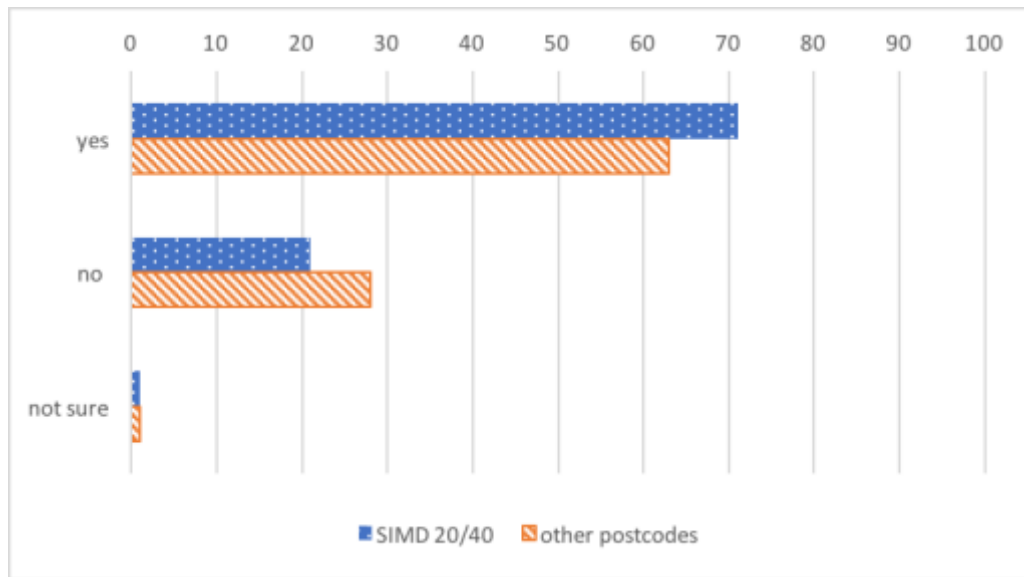
Figure 13 If met personal tutor during first semester: students from SIMD 20/40 postcodes by HN status
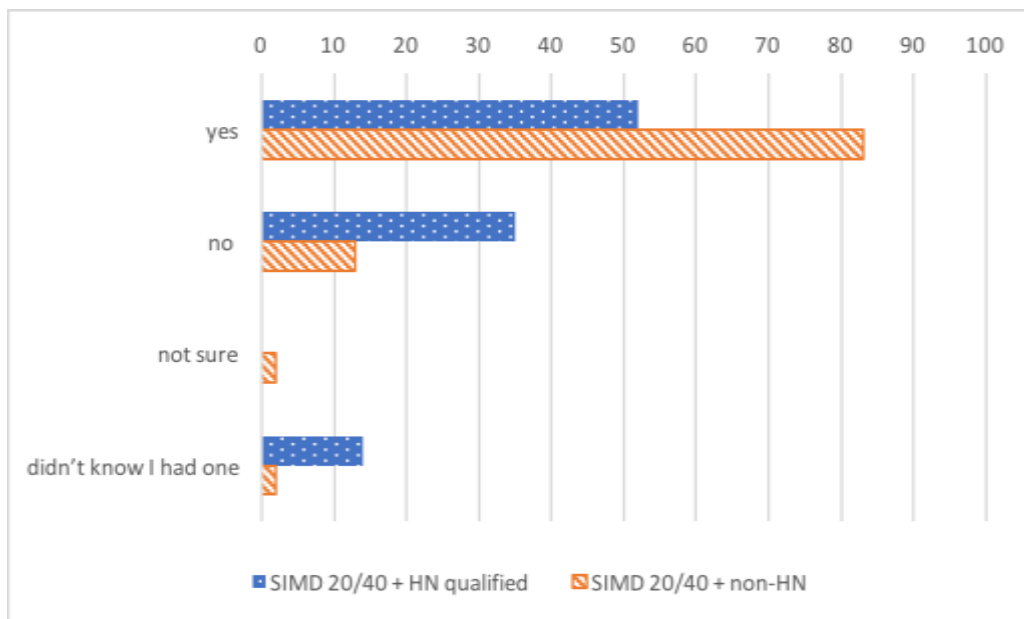
The findings indicate that SIMD status in itself is not related to students' experience of the personal tutor system rather it is having an HN qualification and being a direct entrant that is associated with students' awareness of and meeting with their PT.

The small number of respondents from SIMD 20/40 postcodes means it is not possible to examine whether their responses vary depending on the University attended.

A range of other factors that might have a bearing on students' engagement with their personal tutor were considered, including whether they had part-time employment during term time and, if so, their working hours (Table 8). Nearly two thirds of HN qualified respondents reported being in a job (64%) compared with well under a half of non HN students (45%). Students from SIMD 20/40 were more likely to be working than others from more affluent postcodes (53% v 43%).

However, simply having a job did not make a difference to whether or not students had met with personal tutor. The critical factor is their hours of work. Figure 14 shows that 51% of those who were working 15 hours or more a week had met their personal tutor compared with 70% of students with shorter working hours (met PT: 15+ hrs: 51% v under 15 hrs: 70%).

Figure 14 Students in term time job: if met personal tutor during first semester by hours of work (% of those working)
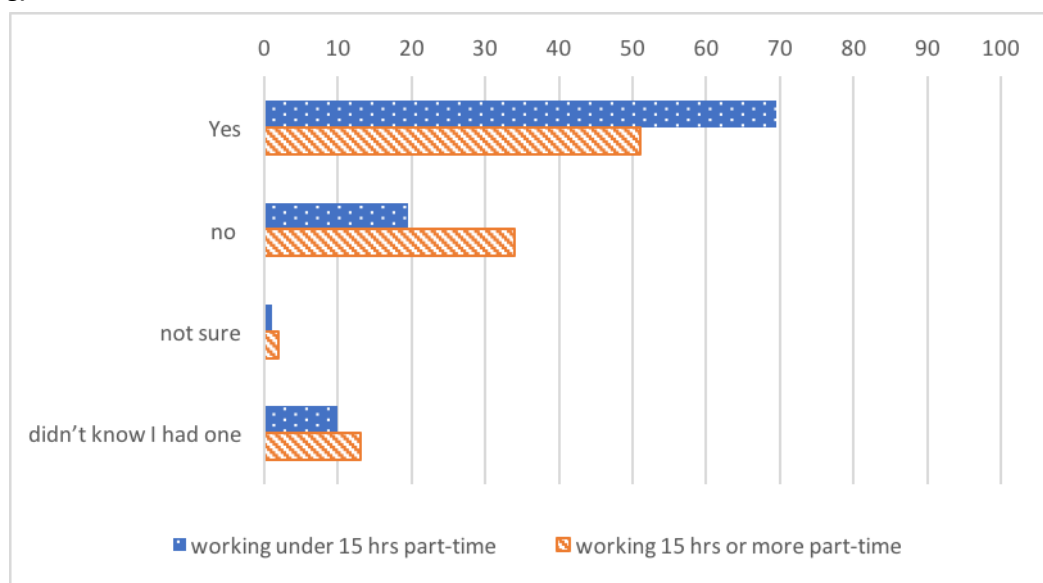
Comparing the working hours of the different student groups, we found that while a higher proportion of students from SIMD 20/40 worked longer than their counterparts from other areas, the difference is not statistically significant (table 8). However, the difference in the working hours of HN and non HN qualified students was significant: 62% were employed for 15 or more hours a week compared with 51% of non HN students.

Table 8 Term time working by HN and SIMD status (%)

	HN %	Non HN %	SIMD 20/40 %	Other SIMD %
Employed	64	45	53	43
Working hours of employed students:				
Less than 15 hours pw	38	49	40	52
15 or more hours pw	62	51	60	49

We used a logistic regression model to examine the relative importance of the two factors - having an HN qualification and working for more than 15 hours per week - on students' likelihood of meeting with their personal tutor. The model showed that each factor had an independent effect on reducing students' likelihood of having a meeting. Thus, being HN qualified had a negative impact regardless of whether the student was also working long hours. Equally, those who were working long hours were less likely to meet their personal tutor irrespective of whether or not they were HN qualified.

Meetings depend on the initiative of personal tutors

Students' meetings with their personal tutor in their first semester, were mainly at the initiative of the member of staff; - this applied to both HN and non HN qualified students (HN: 70%; non HN: 69%). Overall, only a quarter of students in each category had made the arrangements themselves (HN and non HN: 25%) but those attending University 1 were most likely to have done so (HN: 38%; non HN: 33%) than at the other two institutions. This may reflect one of the courses on offer at University 1 which involves students contacting their PT as part of their course work.

The same pattern applies to students from SIMD 20/40 postcodes and their counterparts from other areas, meetings were dependent on their PT arranging them. The numbers concerned are too small to enable analysis by university.

The most common reasons both HN and non HN students gave for not meeting their PT were that:

- ° 'no-one organized a meeting' (HN: 46%; non HN: 56%).
- ° 'didn't know I could/should have a meeting' (HN 39%; non HN 27%).

HN students' year of entry to their degree once again made a difference to their responses. Half of the second and third year entrants who had not met with their personal tutor

indicated that this was because they did not know that they could or should. In contrast, no HN student who had started in first year gave this as a reason.

It seems that if personal tutors do not take the initiative in organizing meetings then students are unlikely to be proactive in doing so. Given that some students did not even know they had a personal tutor, it is not surprising that others students were unclear about how the system works and so did not know that they could or should meet with their personal tutor.

Analysis of students' responses in respect of their postcode (SIMD) is not possible because of small base numbers.

Students were positive about the meetings with their personal tutor

Most students who had met their personal tutor found it to be fairly or very useful and this was particularly the case for HN qualified students (table 9: HN: 83% v non HN 72%). It is notable that within this overall figure of 'fairly/very useful', well over a third of both groups responded that the meeting had been 'very useful' (HN 37%; non HN 39%). It seems that those who did *not* have a meeting were missing out on a potentially useful experience.

Table 9 If meeting with personal tutor useful: HN and non HN qualified students

	HN %	Non HN %
Very/ fairly useful	83	72
Not much use/ not at all useful	17	28
N	(84)	(206)

No significant differences were evident in the opinion of students from SIMD 20/40 postcodes and their counterparts from less deprived areas. Most students in both groups were positive about their meeting with their PT (SIMD 20/40: 81%; other postcodes: 74%). Students' opinion of the meeting with their personal tutor did not vary significantly across the three Universities.

Did students ask staff for advice and use university services?

HN and non HN qualified students

Students, irrespective of their HN status, were more likely to approach lecturers and tutors for advice than any of the other sources listed (Fig 15: HN: 82% and non HN 76%).

Encouragingly, the large majority thought the advice they had received had been helpful and this applied to both HN and non HN qualified students (HN: 88%; non HN: 93%).

Given the discussion in the previous section about personal tutors, it is not surprising to see that students were somewhat less likely to have sought advice from their personal tutor (PT) (HN: 56%; non HN: 59%). Thus a substantial minority of students, therefore, both HN and non HN, had not sought advice from their personal tutor. Some of these students may not have needed to do so but as the data already reported shows some respondents simply did not know that they had a personal tutor or were unaware that they could have a meeting.

Figure 15 If sought advice from university staff and services: HN and non HN students:
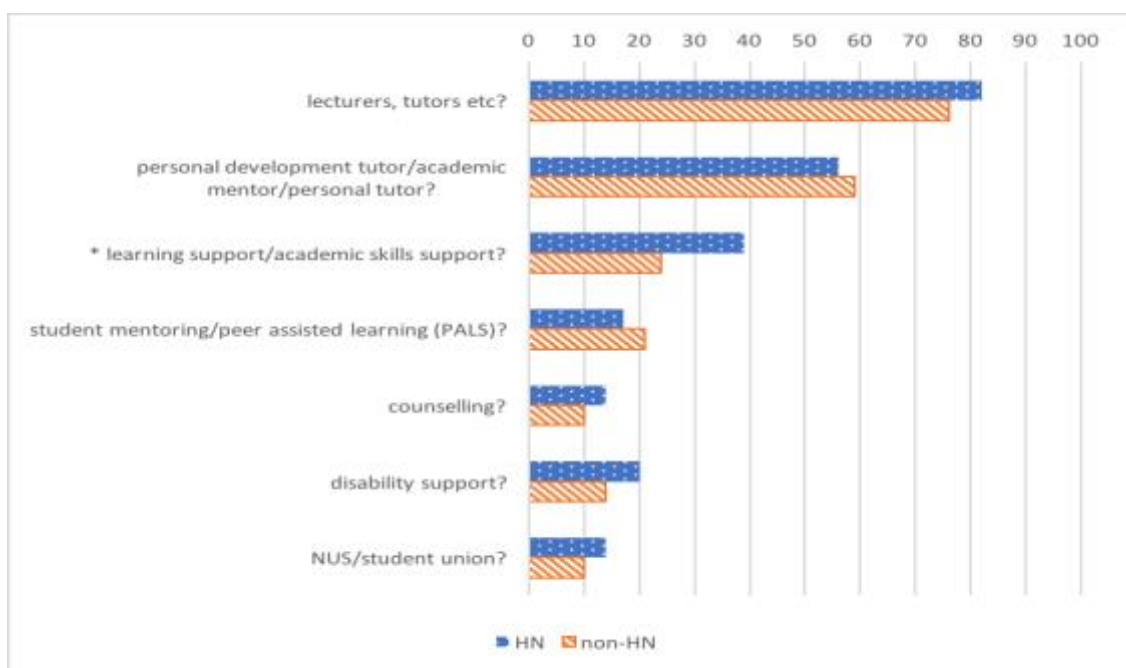
* Asterisked item shows statistically significant difference between the two groups at the 95% confidence level

Figure 16 If advice from university staff and services was helpful: HN vs non HN students (% of those who sought advice from each of the sources)
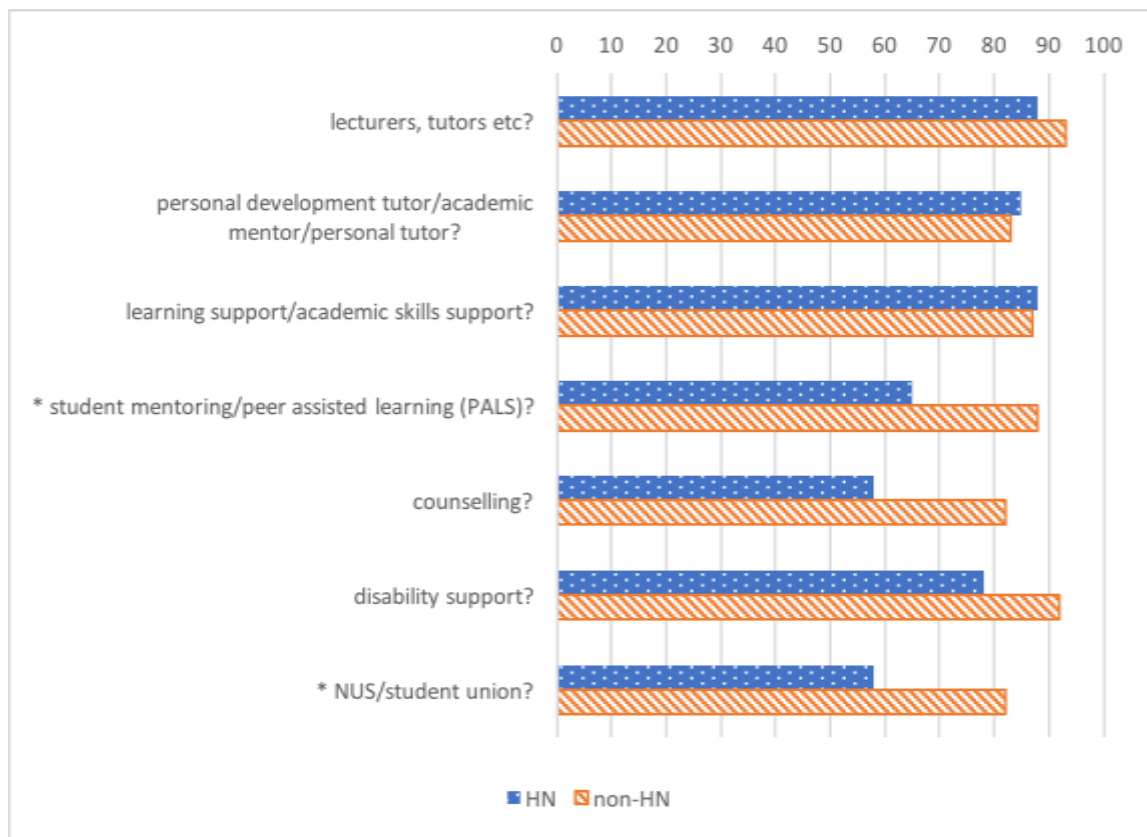
*** Asterisked items show statistically significant differences between the two groups at the 95% confidence level*

The one service which HN qualified students were significantly more likely to use than their non HN counterparts was learning support/academic skills development (HN: 39%v non HN: 24%) and within the HN group, year of entry made a difference: third year entrants were more likely to have made use of the learning/academic skills support on offer than those in either second or first year (3rd: 48% vs 31% both 1st and 2nd years).

Both HN and non HN qualified students were equally positive about the help they had received (fig 16: HN: 88%v non HN: 87%). Among the HN qualified group, 3rd year entrants were especially appreciative, almost all of them had found the advice helpful (fig: 17: 95%), as did a majority of first and second years who had made use of the learning/academic skills support (both 78%).

Figure 17 Advice from learning/academic skills support: HN students by year of entry
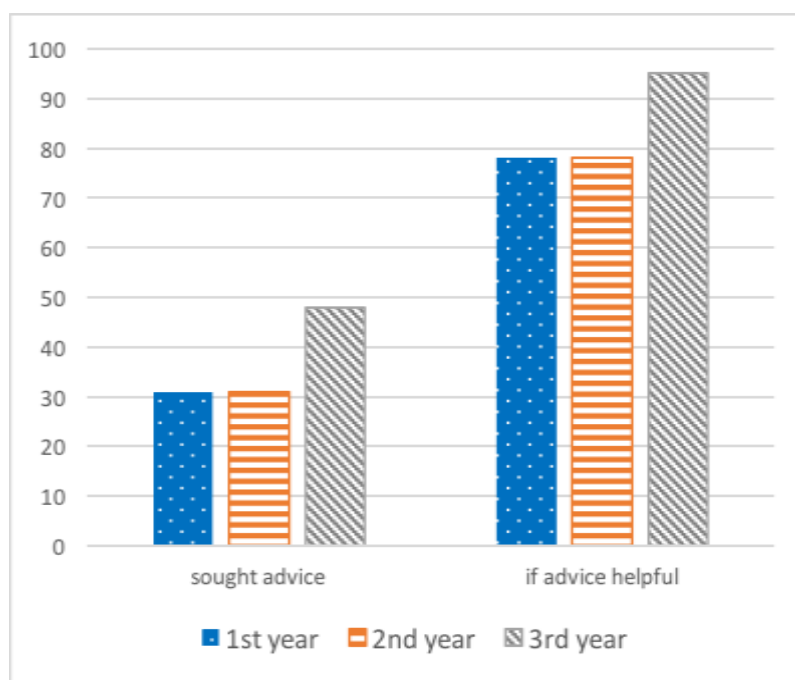
The other support provision was less likely to be used by students. Obviously not all students need to make use of the available services, the important question is whether the level of use reported here is appropriate. Certainly some of the comments made by respondents in the survey suggest that while some had no need, others did not realise such provision was available or were reluctant to use it out of embarrassment or fear of being seen as stupid. This issue is explored further in the next chapter.

Student mentoring/peer assisted learning was one aspect of provision where there was some variation across the universities. The extent to which HN qualified students reported making use of this service was highest in University 1 (29%) dropping to 16% in University 2 and 11% in University 3. However, the use of such provision by non HN students did not differ depending on the University attended.

Similar proportions of HN and Non HN students had taken part in student mentoring/peer assisted learning (fig 15:HN: 17% v non HN: 21%) but there was a significant difference between HN in their opinion of it. Although almost two-thirds of the HN qualified students who had taken part in had found it helpful, their response was significantly lower than that of their non HN peers (fig 16: HN: 65% v non HN: 88%). This suggests that while such schemes are valuable to both HN and non HN students, there may be scope to tailor them further to the needs of HN students.

Students from SIMD 20/40 and other postcodes

The extent to which students from SIMD 20/40 postcodes and their counterparts from more affluent areas made use of the various elements of support provision is very similar with no significant difference. It mirrors the pattern described in the previous section: lecturers and tutors were the main source of advice for both sets of students (SIMD 20/40: 75% others: 80%). This was followed some way behind by personal tutors (fig 18: SIMD 20/40: 56% others: 58%).

Figure 18 Students from SIMD 20/40 & other postcodes: if sought advice from university staff and services
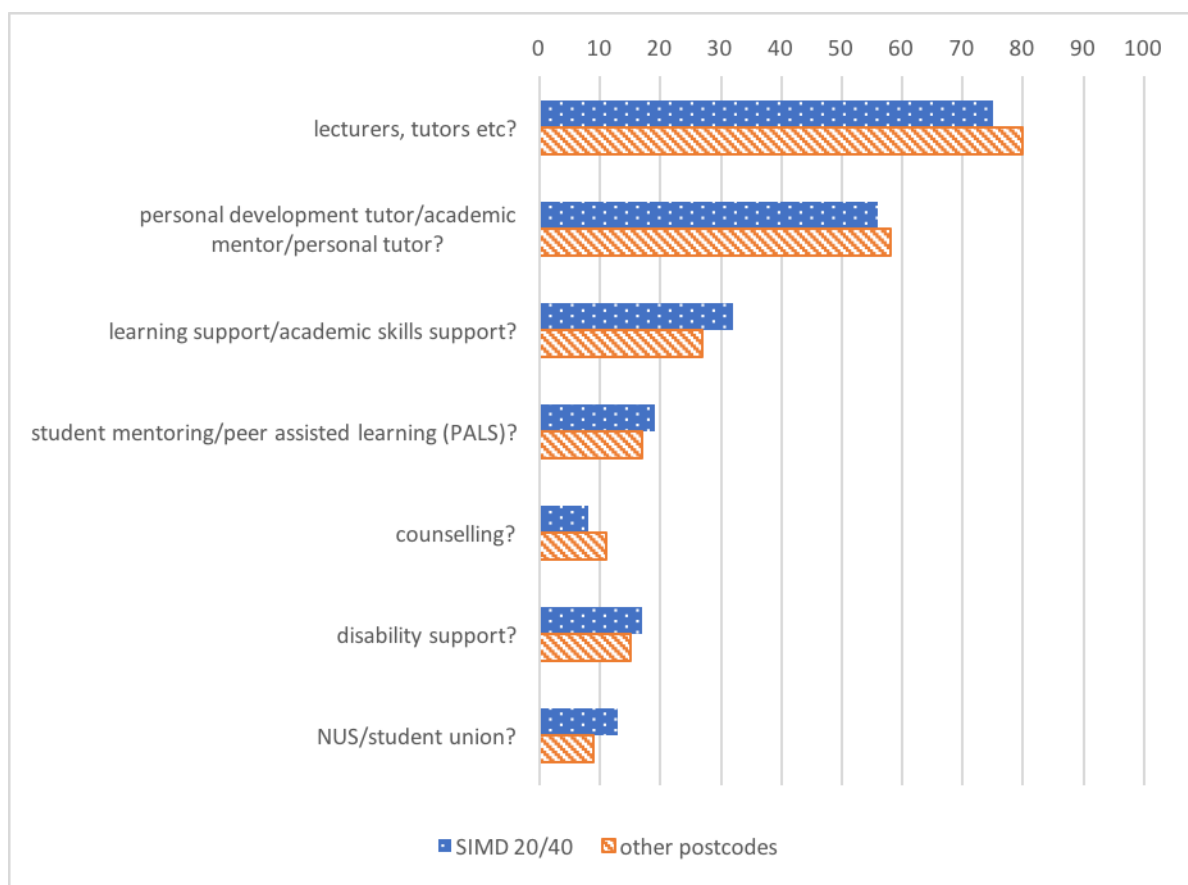
The opinion of the advice they had accessed is similar between the two groups of students from the different postcodes (fig 19) and it also mirrors the positive opinion of HN and non HN qualified students. The small numbers of SIMD 20/40 students who had used four of the seven services means it is not possible to consider whether they found them helpful.

Figure 19 If advice from university staff and services was helpful: students from SIMD 20/40 & other postcodes
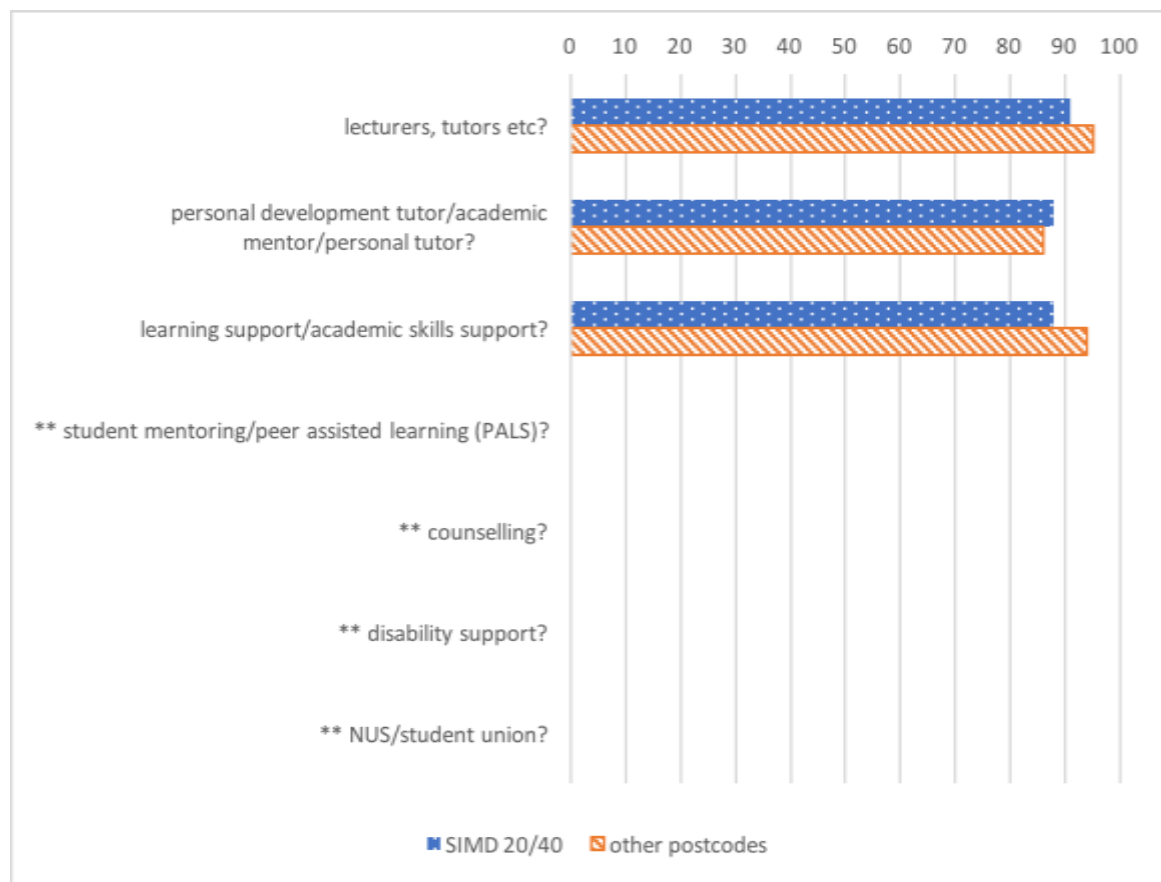
**: base Ns too small for analysis

Support from other students, friends and family

It is clear that what might be termed 'informal' sources of advice are very important to students, in particular, other students. This is the case regardless of whether or not they had an HN qualification, their year of entry, their postcode and University attended. A large majority had sought advice from other students about difficulties they had encountered (fig 20: HN: 85%; non HN: 88%).

Both HN and non HN qualified students were also likely to talk over any difficulties with their family (HN: 70%; non HN: 68%). A higher proportion of those with an HN reported talking to friends outside university than did other students (HN: 80% v non HN: 68%). This may be because they are much more likely than their non HN counterparts to be living in private accommodation or the family home) and thus probably more in contact with their non- university friends.

Figure 20 Use of informal sources of support: HN and non HN students (%)
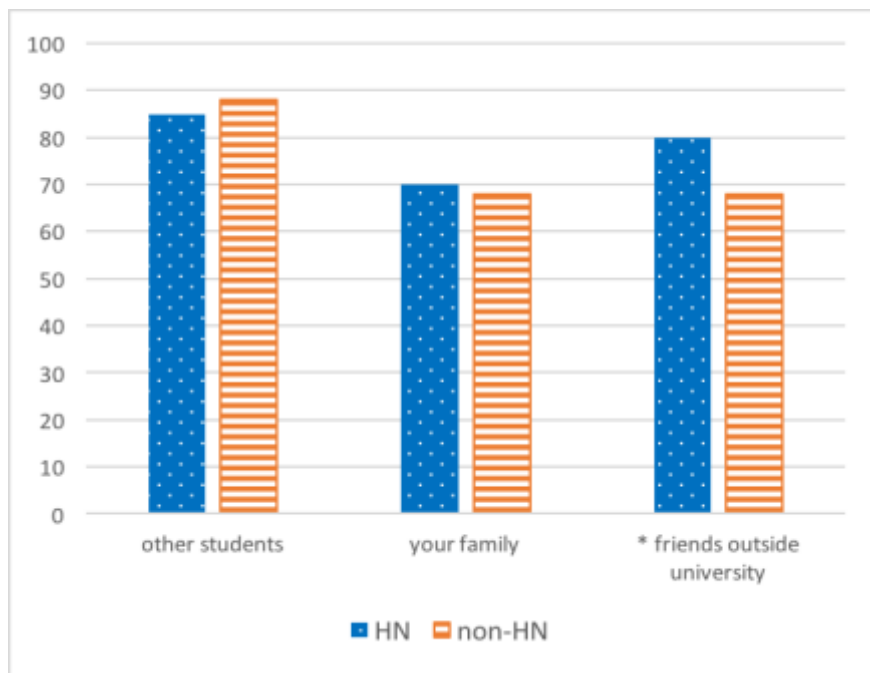
Asterisked item indicates statistically significant difference between the two groups at 95% confidence level

Figure 21 If informal sources of support helpful: HN and non HN students (% of those who spoke to each source)

Asterisked items indicate statistically significant differences between the two groups at 95% confidence level

All three sources of support were judged helpful but students most appreciated their discussions with other students (fig 21: helpful: HN: 94%; non HN 96%). Possibly these students were doing the same or similar course and therefore would be in the position to understand what the individual was finding difficult and to give more detailed and relevant advice.

A majority of HN qualified students judged the support they received from family outside of university as helpful (72%), clearly a very positive response but it represents a slightly lower proportion of students compared with the responses from the non HN group (88%). Similarly, although HN qualified students were more likely to talk over their difficulties with friends outside university than were their non HN counterparts, this appeared to be slightly less helpful to them (HN: 77% vs non HN 85%). It may be that the family of HN students and their non university friends are less likely to be in a position to give useful advice, for example, if they have no experience of higher education themselves.

Analysis in relation to students' postcodes showed that the informal sources of support were similarly important and useful to them with no significant variation between those from SIMD 20/40 postcodes and students from others areas.

It is notable that students were considerably more likely to find informal support from other students helpful than the formal student mentoring/peer assisted learning schemes (figs 20 and 16). This shows the importance of students being able to integrate into their course and get to know their fellow students. Thus strategies by universities to support this process are likely to be useful – this was an aspect commented on by some of the students interviewed as part of the study.

Had students considered leaving?
The survey took place in the second semester to gain an insight to students' first year at university so by its nature does not give a picture of student retention and discontinuation. Students who responded to the survey are those who have managed to complete most of their first year.

Figure 22 if ever thought about leaving their course: HN vs non HN students (%)
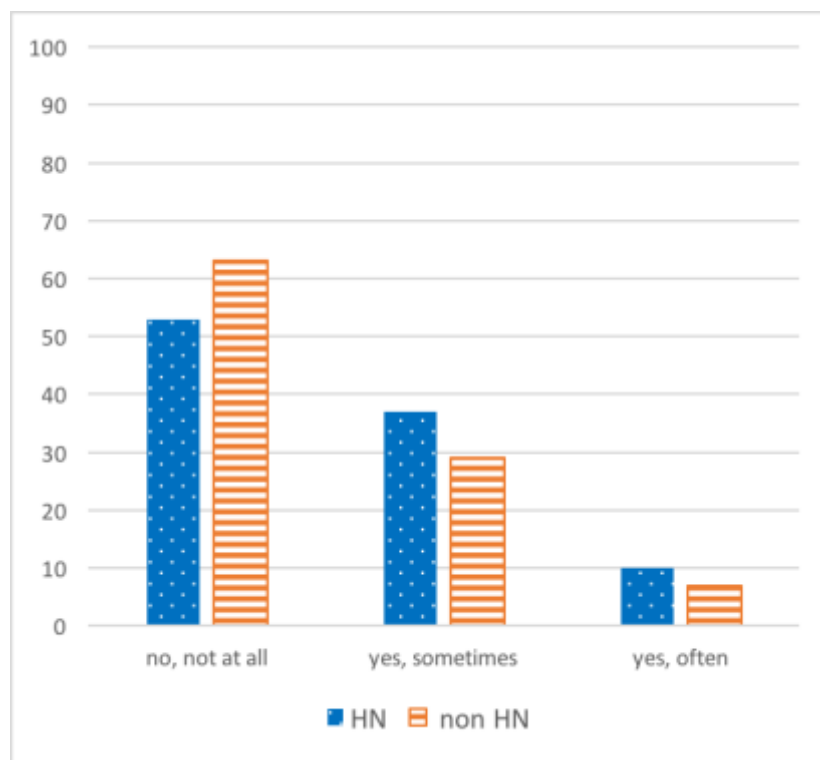
Nevertheless, they were asked if they had ever thought about leaving their course and a significant difference is evident between HN and non HN qualified students. A higher proportion of non HN students had never contemplated leaving than had their peers who had an HN qualification (fig 22). Nearly two thirds of non HN students had never entertained the idea of leaving compared with around a half of HN entrants (fig 22: HN: 53% v non HN: 63%). Comments made by both HN and non HN students in the survey about why they had considered leaving tended to focus on study difficulties but we do not have comprehensive data on the reasons. Only a very small percentage of students in either group responded that they had often thought about leaving (HN: 10%; non HN: 7%) but it was at least an occasional thought for a substantial minority of both HN and non HN qualified students (37% and 29% respectively).

Comparison of the responses of students from the most deprived neighbourhoods with those from more affluent areas did not show any significant variation.

Summary of survey findings

1. HN qualified entrants were considerably more likely than other students to have found the move to degree study more difficult than expected; this was especially true of third year entrants.

2. Year of entry is critical to HN students' experience of degree study: second year and especially third year entrants were significantly more likely to have experienced particular difficulty in relation to the type of teaching; assessment; not knowing about a topic others had done; and expected standard of work.

3. Students from SIMD 20/40 postcodes were more likely to report difficulties with their degree study than their peers from more affluent areas. This applied to the extent of independent study; type of teaching; assessment; size of lectures; and travel. Having an HN qualification had an additional negative impact on their experience of two of these areas (assessment and the size of lectures).

4. A higher proportion of HN qualified students had difficulty getting to know other students and integrating into classes than their non HN qualified peers.

5. Irrespective of HN status, students' age made a difference to their ease of integration, especially getting to know other students socially.

6. Students' integration into university life did not vary according to their SIMD status.

7. A small majority of students had found their induction helpful to them subsequently; opinion did not vary significantly across the different student groups.

8. Less than half of HN students had met with their personal tutor in their first semester; this compares with nearly three quarters of non HN students. They were also less likely to know they had a personal tutor. Year of entry is key: it is the HN students who started in second or third year who had a low level of contact with, and awareness of, their personal tutor.

9. Students' awareness of and contact with their personal tutor varied across the three Universities; this was the case for both HN and non HN students.

10. Overall, students' SIMD status made no difference to their awareness of and contact with their personal tutor apart from those who were also HN qualified.

11. In itself, having a paid job made no difference to whether students met with their personal tutor but for those who worked, their hours and their HN status each had an independent effect. Students employed for 15 hours or more per week were less likely to have met with their personal tutor than those working under 15 hours. HN qualified students were less likely to meet their personal tutor irrespective of their working hours.

12. Meetings were generally arranged by the personal tutor although this varied across the universities.

13. The main reasons students gave for not having a meeting were that 'no-one organized a meeting' and 'I didn't know I could/should have a meeting'. The latter reason was most common among HN second or third year entrants.

14. A large majority of the students who did meet their personal tutor found it helpful and this was especially the case for HN students. Students' opinion did not vary by SIMD status or across the universities.

15. Students were most likely to seek advice from their lecturers and tutors, followed some way behind by advice from their personal tutor. This pattern applied across the student body irrespective of HN or SIMD status. A large majority thought that the advice they had received was helpful.

16. A minority of students had made use of the specialist support services. HN qualified students, especially third year entrants, were more likely to use academic skills support and were extremely positive about its value.

17. While it seems that many students did not feel the need to use the support services, others lacked the awareness and/or the confidence to do so.

18. Overall, around a fifth of students had taken part in student/peer mentoring schemes but the figure varied across the universities. Although almost two thirds of the HN students who done so were positive about it, this was a lower proportion compared with non HN participants.

19. For all groups, other students provided their key support and students were more positive about these informal discussions than formal student mentoring/peer assisted learning.

20. Most students had found discussions with their family and with their friends outside university helpful and this was especially the case for non HN students. No variation in relation to SIMD status was apparent.

21. Nearly half of HN students had thought about leaving their course, a slightly higher proportion than non HN students. However, only a small percentage of students in either group had seriously considered doing so. There were no differences in respect of students' SIMD status.

Chapter 3: Preparatory, pre-entry and induction support

Introduction

This is the first of three chapters that report on the interview element of the study, considering students' experience of their first year of degree study and how they were supported in greater depth. Details of the methodology and interviewees are given in chapter 1. To re-cap, we interviewed 34 students, of whom 19 were HN qualified, five had attended a SHEP school, three had entered via an access course (SWAP) and seven had standard entry qualifications.

This chapter covers the preparatory, pre-entry and induction stages. The following chapter then discusses the challenges students encountered in their first year of study, the extent to which academic teaching staff supported them and their informal support from other students, taking into account the question of their integration into university. Chapter 5 deals with students' experience of the formal support system at their University.

This study focuses on students' experiences and perspective; these may not be the same as staff's understanding of arrangements and provision or their views on students' responses. We say this not to undermine either students' or staff's views but simply to acknowledge that such differences are to be expected.

All of the interviewees have been assigned pseudonyms; if any names are the same as other students in their first year of study at the same university, this is purely co-incidental and does not refer to them. Similarly, members of staff mentioned by the interviewees have also been given pseudonyms.

We give interviewees' year of entry and their university but after initially including their degree subject we realised that this might compromise their anonymity, especially where they are on a course with a small number of students, and so this is omitted. Chapter one does give an overview of the degree courses covered by the interviews.

The three universities in the study use different terminology for similar staff roles and support provision, for simplicity and to preserve anonymity we use the same term for all three or use a generic descriptive term rather than the specific name used by each of the universities.

Supporting HN students' preparation for degree study

This research focuses on the students' experience of their first year of university study and their awareness and use of the formal and informal, supports available to them. Before doing so, however, we consider the views of the HN qualified students about how well their HNC or HND had prepared them for degree study. The relationship between HN provision at college and degrees at university is a particularly close and direct one: HN qualified students are expected to articulate into the second or third year of a degree, often through specific articulation arrangements between colleges and universities. It therefore is relevant to reflect on how well the HN students who were interviewed thought that they had been supported by their college and relevant universities to make the transition to degree study, and especially to do so as direct entrants. Certainly the HN students we interviewed perceived it as relevant and expressed quite strong views on the matter.

A majority of the HN qualified interviewees **were critical** of how well their HN course had prepared them for degree study. It was commonplace for them to refer to being 'spoon fed' with little requirement for any '*self-study'.* Jenny explained:

> *"they gave us lots of printed notes at College so you are not doing your own research to get these notes and it was very much spoon feeding your stuff that you needed to get through… So you are not getting the chance to work out and develop your own learning style" HN yr 2 Uni 1*

Another frequent criticism was that they had not had the opportunity to develop certain academic skills, Ed commented:

> *"I don't think college really prepared me for uni in a lot of ways because they never taught you about essay writing, referencing was not a big deal, they were quite willing to accept lots of references that uni does not, you know like newspapers. I think as well there was a lot more to do in class than there is uni" HN 2ⁿᵈ yr Uni 3*

Most (although not all) of the HN students interviewed had been advised by college staff that they should be prepared for a heavy workload at university and less contact with lecturers and tutors. Beyond this, however, the common view was **that college staff** were **not in a position to give the more detailed guidance** interviewees wanted, as Sarah pointed out:

> *"they helped me to apply but that was as far as it went… they didn't really know what to expect …they didn't know the answers to the questions we asked.… They would give very generic answers, like 'do lots of reading' but then I would ask 'what you suggest? Do you know what modules are covered? Or "do you know of any*

textbooks?' '"No'…I tried so hard to prepare but I basically came to the course blind, not having a clue what to expect." HN 3rd yr Uni 3

Several of the interviewees could see why this might happen, the desire to ensure that students - many of whom were returning to education after some time - were successful in their studies but the general view was that such spoon feeding should at least be tapered off towards the end of their HN.

Discussing this with Claire, she recognised the sometimes **conflicting demands on colleges** but nevertheless thought that her **preparation could have been better**:

"College wants to make it easy for students to get back into education but it is such a massive step up from college to university. College is quite easy, there's not nearly as much self-study as at university but college could prepare you more to go to university…college can't be at the same level [but] it should be a bit more serious than it is, there shouldn't be such a big gap. In my opinion HNC/D courses could have higher expectations from student who consider going to university … I have spoke to my friends who were doing an HNC/D course with me in college and their opinions are quite similar to mine" Claire 2nd yr Uni 1

The experience of the interviewees who had completed a **SWAP access course contrasted with that of HN qualified entrants.** Although they too spoke of being perhaps a little too 'spoon- fed' on their access course, they did not have the same issues in relation to academic study as was common among HN qualified interviewees. Mike, who had been on SWAP access course in health science and who had completed an HND in a related area some years before had found a big difference between the two courses. He described his earlier HND as '*more practical*' *while* his SWAP course had been '*more intense*', with lots of support available and extra classes offered with specific time set aside to learn referencing. It appeared that several for the SWAP students, their access course had provided the opportunity to develop what one termed '*a strategy for learning*,' such as planning a study timetable, making sure to do reading and notetaking in advance of lectures, annotating the notes in the lecture and then reviewing them afterwards.

Of course, the two types of courses – HN and SWAP access courses – are different in their purpose and the SWAP interviewees also had the very important advantage in that all of them entered first year of their degree programme. The SWAP course is specifically designed to prepare participants for university whereas HN provision has the dual purpose of providing a vocational relevant qualification to fit students for entry to the labour market as well as for possible entry to degree study. Moreover, some HN students start out with no thought of moving on to a degree, a previous study found that for 41% of HN students who did go on to degree study, this had not been their plan or even a serious possibility when

they started their HN course (Howieson 2012). In the present study, Kieren, for example, had only put in his university application at the end of his HND after finding out that he needed a degree to get the type of employment he wanted. The possibility of such incremental decision-making is one of the aspects of the HN route valued by students (Howieson 2013). The question does remain, however, whether there is more that could be done in HN programmes to prepare students better for degree study.

Some of the interviewees who had been on HN courses mentioned *visits by university staff and students* but opinion seemed to vary on their value. Jenny described a visit from a local university as being '*more to sell the university*' than giving students useful information. This contrasts with Graham's experience of several university speakers to his civil engineering HND course and it was the detail provided that he particularly valued:

> "*they showed you a lot more about how the work was structured at university, potential placements, prospects, that sort of thing. They give a lot of information out.*" HN 3rd yr Uni 1

Alan described a visit from a former student to his HND course as "*kind of useful*". On the face of it, a visit by a student who had taken the same HN then gone onto the related degree course would seem ideal. In this case Alan thought it of limited value because this student talked more about university and student life in general than about the specifics of the degree course and what was expected of students.

> "*we got someone from [name] university…they brought in someone, some woman, who did citing and referencing and basically we got told how to do that sort of thing…and reporting writing by one of the other [college] lecturers but that was the third semester in the HND, it was right at the end …*" Kieren third yr, Uni 1

Although it appeared to be uncommon, the experience of several students shows that it is *possible to introduce more independent learning into both HNCs and HNDs*. In Gill's case:

> "*They did a couple of things to try and prepare us by, you know, instead of giving as handouts at the start which they usually did, towards the end of the HNC they had a couple of sessions where they said take your notes and [you] digest a lecture basically, so they did try little things to try and prepare us… They prepared you towards the end of the year to think for yourself.*" HN 2nd yr Uni 3

Carlie, a third year entrant, praised the extent of preparation for university on her HND where staff from one of the local universities came in on a block session to offer a variety of activities including essay writing. She also made the point that the student has a responsibility to make the most of any input, that 'it's as much about what you take for yourself from provision' and felt that she had perhaps made more of the experience than

some of her peers on the same HND. Corey too was positive about the support at college to develop his study skills, including advice on how to approach his graded unit –' *how you should attack it*'- that had stood him in good stead in the project work on his third year degree course. The aspects that he identified as '*missing from the course*' were more to do with 'self -study'.

Overall, it seems that the preparation and support that the HN students were asking for is what the associate student scheme was set up to achieve: closer links between HN provision at college and relevant degree programmes at university as a way to enhance students' preparation and ease their transition. However, evidence from a related study which surveyed both associate and 'standard' HN students at college (see P 8) indicates that the associate student scheme has had limited success and the participating students disappointed with their level of preparation and contact with their associate university (Howieson 2016).

Later in the report we discuss the challenges of degree study and university life faced by direct entrants, especially those who go directly from an HND into the third year of their degree. The question of **when it is best to articulate** was an issue highlighted by a number of HN qualified interviewees, in particular, lack of information or support from college staff about the possibility of leaving college with an HNC to go onto degree study rather than continue on to the HND. Ed said

> "It was always about staying on for the HND…they want to be able to offer the course and keep viable but they should really be thinking about what's best for you. They should ask HNC students if anyone is thinking about university and organise UCAS classes for them." HN 2nd yr Uni 3

A number of those who had left college after their HNC were critical that their college had not raised the possibility as an option for them and thought they should have done so. This was true of Alan:

> "My college didn't even mention it was an option, it was quite late in the year and I was debating whether to stay on for HND and I stumbled upon the fact that X uni has a directly compatible course… I thought why not, go for it… I had actually no idea what is walking into. I understand that they're kind of protecting the wrong interest in certain extent.… So it's in their interests… I think that may have been a contributing factor to not having a conversation about where you are going after [HNC]." HN 2nd yr Uni 2

Several interviewees such as Claire and Nathan who had left college after their HNC spoke about the experience of their college classmates who had continued at college to take their

HND. There had not been any change in teaching and learning approaches on the HND to prepare them for the third year of degree study. Nathan commented:

> "I've spoken to a couple of people that stayed on to do the HND and they are saying that the teaching style is very much the same as first year [HNC] and I just feel that if you are coming with an HND and going into third year, it's going to be a massive difference for them in the teaching style and environment. I am not saying do not do it but I think they would need to be told more than what I was told." HN 2nd yr Uni 2

Contact with universities at the pre-entry stage

It was difficult to get a comprehensive picture from the interviewees about their pre-entry contact with universities, including the one they were attending: some could not remember if they had visited on Open Days, Applicant Days etc; in other cases students sometimes struggled to recall the detail or to separate them from later summer school or induction activities.

Those who had been on **Open Days and/or Applicant Days** appreciated the opportunity to talk to lecturers and in some cases students. Being able to see round the campus was of great value to students: it helped to give them a '*feel*' for the university, its facilities and location and whether it was right for them:

> " we got to find out what the accommodation was like, what rooms we wanted and how everything kind of worked within the university instead of going into first year and being like 'no, what do I do? How do I do this? How do I do that? It was really good.'" standard entrant, 1st yr Uni 3

> "It was good in as much the staff who were there, they were really helpful and welcoming but at the same time it was quite a shock to see all the people who were there and to be in a really crowded place because X College is a very small campus." HN 2nd yr Uni 3

> "I walked in and I knew I wanted to come here… It has a good atmosphere....I got a good vibe." SHEP school 1st yr Uni 2

Students who had been required to attend for **interview and/or audition** as part of the application and selection process for their course were extremely positive about the way these more in-depth contacts allowed them to get a more detailed insight into their course. As Evie remarked:

> "It wasn't really till the interview that I really found out about the course...how it was spread out, how much practical I get to do, what activities were available for

me…how much one on one time I would get with my teacher, stuff like that." SHEP school 1ˢᵗ yr Uni 2

Holly too identified the benefits of meeting staff and students at interview and to find out more about her course; both she and Evie noted that it made it less daunting at the start of the academic year that they already knew some of their fellow students.

Most of the interviewees (although not all) spoke of receiving a series of different **emails and information packs** from their university in the month or so before starting. Some students paid more attention to them than did others. Will, a school leaver entrant to first year commented that he had received *'the standard emails'* but that he *'didn't bother with all of that*."

The value of **social media** at the pre-entry stage was highlighted by a number of students. Arif, for example, talked about the 'Uni Facebook group' which enabled contact with the university, with other applicants and with current students:

"I could ask the Uni any questions as well as interact with other students… so it was possible to make friends early on as well as ask older students for the advice." Standard quals 1ˢᵗ yr Uni 1

The bulk of students' suggestions for developing pre-entry provision concerned the need for **earlier and more detailed information on their course** which would help them feel less apprehensive and prepare them better for the challenges ahead.

Jack suggested the information he had received in advance could be improved:

"they [emails] said like 'have a look at what's on campus, what's available to you' but in terms of knowing what the details of what were in my course, I didn't receive that till the enrolment week- you were given a booklet that explained what would be contained in our first year and how it's broken up. Having that earlier would be better so that you would know that little bit more...particularly that first few weeks when you get there, that's when everyone feels so uncertain about everything… knowing what you are going to be doing allows people's minds to be more settled". Standard quals 1st yr Uni 1

Carlie had attended an Open Day but thought this could have been improved to have given her a better insight into what she would be doing on her course:

"at the Open Day, it was just looking at people's work and not finding out what you're really are going to be doing… that's something the university could have improved, to say more about the course instead of just like showing the students' work." HN, 3rd yr, Uni 1

Sophie, a second year direct entrant had found her Applicants Day visit to university 2 useful since she was able to see the building and the layout, attend a lecture and have the chance to ask questions, but suggested that it would have been good to have had **something specifically for direct entry students.**

Looking back on the demands he encountered in his first months as a second year direct entrant, Nathan would have appreciated some assistance in preparing for this at the pre-entry stage:

> *"Even when you get your application accepted there could be leaflets getting sent out to say about ways of learning 'this is how you prepare', just let people know. Because the first assessments you get here are in the first couple of months and if you're not prepared, the first two months of uni can be daunting." HN 2nd yr Uni 2*

Several direct entry students made the point that the ***timing*** of some pre-entry activities was ***geared to school applicants*** and the school year and less suited to college entrants. Robbie, for example, suggested Open Days should not be confined to the autumn but also held later. Sophie thought that is would be useful if the student information packs sent out prior to arrival (generally in August after the school results) were despatched earlier to direct entry college students to give them time to prepare:

> *"…cos it's when you finish college you either get a conditional or unconditional or whatever. I think It's better to send out packs because you get your results quicker. I know they probably want to send all information together, you know when the secondary schools get them. So, I think more information, the timing of the information. Even just have it online …." HN, 2nd yr, Uni 2*

Setting up ***social media groups for applicants*** was something that Martin highlighted. He noted that this year he has found the Facebook page specifically for his course very helpful and suggested that this should be set up in advance:

> *"you need more information on courses before you start. It would help to have access to others who have done your course and to have more advice on how to use [names university's VLE]. There's Facebook page for the course…it would be good if there was some way this could be set up in advance of people arriving so that they could get to know each other in advance. The uni should send everybody an introductory email and welcome pack with a link to a Facebook page/[VLE] forum that's been set up in advance." HN, 2nd yr, Uni 2*

Pre-entry programmes and summer schools

The interviewees who had taken part in the pre-entry programmes such as summer schools or other programmes run by their university prior to the general student induction were **very positive** about them. Comments such as '*brilliant*', '*it was reassuring*', '*put a lot of fears to rest*' and '*meant when you started your course it was more comfortable*' were typical responses.

They appreciated the opportunity to meet other students and become familiar with the university before the influx of the new students at the start of the academic year, as Jenny a second year direct entrant to University 1 said it had provided '*an orientation before all the students arrive*".

Participants identified other benefits such as being introduced to the practicalities of the university systems, campus and library tours, and being introduced to student services and learning support. They valued the chance to experience lectures and be introduced to some academic study skills:

> "…you got to sit in on lectures and get a feel for what the lectures would be like… also [cover] like notetaking, researching for literature reviews and referencing." SHEP school. 1st yr Uni 3.

Reflecting participants' positive opinion of these programmes, there were **only a few suggestions** about how they **might be improved**.

The summer schools and other pre-entry programmes were generally open to all first year and direct entrant students although with some degree of targeting at those from the widening participation categories. It seemed that some programmes were fully mixed in that first year and direct entrants were together for all sessions whereas in other programmes there were some separate activities for direct entrants. Where the programme was fully mixed, there was a demand for at least some **separate activity for direct entrants**. This seemed to be as much about making friends in the same year as about any specific content, as Jenny, a direct entrant explained:

> "you're sitting getting to know somebody really well and then finding out that they're starting in first year". HN 2nd yr Uni 1.

The other suggestion was that funding for these programmes should be increased so that more students could have the opportunity to attend. Nicola was very positive about the benefit she had got from her pre-entry programme but was aware of other students at her university who had also applied but had not been offered a place. She and others thought that the number of **available places should be expanded** so that all students who could benefit would be able to take part.

Students' experience of induction

Interviewees' accounts of their induction pointed to **considerable variation** in the inputs and activities they had experienced not only across the universities but also within the same one. Their induction also varied depending on their year of entry.

A few of the students interviewed were **extremely positive** and thought that their induction *'could not have been better'*. Janet was one of these students, she had been very apprehensive after her Open Day visit at the prospect of coming from a small college to a large and busy university but felt reassured by the way her induction was carried out:

> *"they made a lot of effort to make sure that people felt they were coming to a place where they would be not only studying but that they did care how students got on…[staff were] really kind and good making people feel at ease." HN 2nd yr Uni 2*

Ellie, a first year entrant, had also found all the elements of her induction useful, especially the opportunity to meet students in the year above and the mini seminars she had attended. She spoke of how the latter had helped her become more confident about contributing to the seminars later on her course:

> *"I'm quite a shy person and don't really talk out loud in big groups but they make you do it [in mini seminar] and that was a good thing. It gives you that extra nudge to open up." SHEP school 1st yr Uni 2*

It was **more common**, however, for interviewees to express **mixed views** having found certain aspects of their induction had been more helpful than others or pointing out certain gaps. Sophie, for example, was positive about some aspects of her induction such as the useful information on the modules on her course but was critical of others:

> *"We never got shown how to do a lot of stuff, like how to use [VLE], how to login, how to use printers, that sort of thing". HN 2nd yr Uni 2*

There were instances where students described certain induction activities as causing them **anxiety and stress**. One example, that several referred to was where direct entrants worked on a group project but it appeared that its purpose had not been explained clearly enough to them. Participants thought it was a serious piece of graded work and reported feeling *'under pressure to do well'* in it rather than it *'being fun'*. Robbie, a second year direct entrant to University 2 spoke of being *'stressed and panicked'* by the group project as were the others with the result that they did not engage with Freshers Week. It could have been a useful exercise if they had realized they were not being graded on it. In another example, a first year students at University 1, Jonathan, commented that the introductory games to get to know other students had not been helpful to him and indeed had made him *'quite anxious'* .

While certain students found the introductory exercises stressful, others criticized ice-breakers and other **exercises as childish**. This applied to young first year entrants as well as direct entrants and/or mature students, for example, Will noted that:

> *"Induction wasn't bad for meeting others but the icebreakers were childish, what works in a social situation like freshers' week doesn't in the classroom, it should be more professional in the classroom." Standard entrant 1st yr Uni 1*

All students wanted the **chance to get to know their fellow students** and this was one of the aspects they most wanted their induction to cover but it would seem how this was approached had not always worked well for a minority.

It appeared to vary, including within the same university, whether **direct entrants** spent part of their induction **with first year entrants**. This was seen as the wrong approach by all of those who experienced this mixed induction. They did not want to be mixed in with first year entrants at all, even for only part of their induction. They thought it meant the induction was too geared to young students. Jenny, for example, had found her induction '*very good'* and had appreciated meeting students in the upper years of her course as well as the sessions with other direct entrants but she also commented:

> *"but a lot of it was geared up for kids living on campus so maybe more for the more mature students who may be coming in as a direct entrant". HN 2nd yr Uni 1*

Both Donal and Rhona were first year entrants but as mature students they too found their induction **overly focused on young students** and considered some aspects of it patronizing. Describing the coverage of money management in their induction programme, for example, Rhona said:

> *"We did feel spoken down to, we're not 17 or 18-year-olds leaving home for the first time". SWAP 1st yr Uni 1*

They suggested it would be good to have the **opportunity to meet other mature students** in first year, even if just for a short session. Donal who was the only mature student on his course commented:

> *"it would be good to know you're not the only one " adding that "you can feel quite alone." HN 1st yr Uni 1*

There was a demand from direct entrants for **year specific inductions**: a number of the interviewees made the point that their direct entrant induction had included those starting in both second and third years which had limited its value for them, as Sophie explained:

"It was specifically for direct entrants but it was also for people going into third year as well… you could be sat at a table completely with the third years and you're second year so that is what has happened to us. It was all a bit mismatched and it was not the best." HN 2nd yr Uni 2

The need for induction planning to take account of the particular year of entry of participants was highlighted by Sarah who was a third year direct entrant. Some of her induction activities were taken by current students who had also been direct entrants but they had entered second year and were only now only starting third year. Consequently they could not really answer her questions about third year:

'...they were very vague as well. They have joined in second-year so they didn't know what was coming in third year either. They should of got someone who was already in 4th year who could say 'third year is going to be about this'."

A key issue for all students was whether their induction enabled them to **get to know others on their own course** with whom they would be studying. Not mixing second and third year direct entrant in the same induction was one aspect of this. Another part of this was to have more programme specific induction, at least for part of the time, rather than inductions being organised on a whole school basis which some interviewees had experienced. Jenny commented:

'It was useful splitting into direct entrants but that was across [names broad subject area]...be better if you can get to know people on the same course so then you can chat if you get stuck or if you find out something is a common thing, then it's easier to go and seek help with things as a group." HN 2nd yr Uni 1

Robbie suggested that:

"Given it was a whole week, everyone who was direct entry got lumped in one room together whether you were a direct entry to second or third year and regardless of what course you were on. It was the whole school of [names broad subject area]. Maybe a little bit of partitioning... so that you can build bridges with the people you will actually see during the academic year." HN 2nd yr Uni 2

Direct entrants very much wanted to meet other second or third year direct entrants as appropriate during their induction but they also thought it vital that they had contact with their non direct entrant classmates in the same year to begin to integrate with them to 'create a more collaborative year' as Sarah expressed it. None of the direct entrants interviewed appeared to have had the opportunity to **meet with the existing second or third year students** before the start of classes. Sarah explained:

"The direct entry students were pretty much segregated through the whole process of joining. We were introduced to the direct entry week which was lovely, and we had students helping out, but they were also direct entrants. So while the direct entrants' induction was important we weren't introduced to any other students on course or anything like that." HN 3rd yr Uni 3

Similarly Sophie suggested that induction should include meeting existing students in the same year:

"Have a better way of doing the induction and encouraging integration and things like that …. as opposed to starting out completely different from the others." HN 2nd yr Uni 2

Several of the interviewees thought that this was something that could be done at the beginning of the academic year. Gill wanted compulsory **sessions in the first week(s)** of classes which would both cover what the course would entail in the coming year and also introduce the direct entrants to the other students. She pointed out that she still has only one non-DE friend and that:

"It would have helped me to have been introduced to people in that classroom setting. People aren't interested in talking to new people." HN 2nd yr Uni 3

She went on to make the point that:

If you are bonding with people and feeling part of that group, you are less likely to give up".

The idea of extending induction into the first week(s) of the academic year but doing so as part of classes was put forward by several direct entrants as a way to promote the integration with others on their course, introduce them to their course and perhaps go over key elements that have been covered in the previous year (s). Robbie, for example, commented that induction did not address certain direct entrant issues such as gaps in their knowledge and this should be covered early in the academic year. Claire put forward a similar idea:

"what would be useful that could be done maybe in the first week of the academic year when things are quite loose as people are getting back into things after being on holiday, maybe the lecturer could do a little bit of revision, even just bullet point style of what was covered in first year." HN 2nd yr Uni 1

The issues of integration and direct entrants' knowledge and skills base are discussed further later in the report.

As they had done in relation to pre-entry activities, students commented frequently about wanting more **specific course information** at induction, in particular, in relation to the modules they would be studying. Students' experience did vary, Arif, a young first year student, for example, spoke of receiving an '*extremely useful*' and very specific outline of his course. However, Will, another young first year entrant at the same university highlighted a lack of detail about course content in his induction:

> "*A bit more actually from lecturers [would been better] – it was minimal. [they should] tell you exactly what you will be studying …gives you more of a feel for what you will be actually going to do.*" Standard quals 1st yr Uni 1

Will contrasted the detailed content of the course handbook his friend on a different course had received at induction which '*sets out exactly what each semester of the course entails*' with the minimal information contained in the handbook for his course.

As noted earlier, Sophie thought that her induction had provided 'useful information on *modules*', but this had not been the experience of some others. Joanna, for example, commented that there '*hadn't been enough focus on the detail of the modules* 'and Martin had similar criticisms.

Other suggestions for induction included providing the opportunity for direct entrants whose course involved lab work to **meet the technicians** and learn how to set up as part of induction. This would be especially useful since the labs at university were generally more extensive than those they were familiar with from college.

A final aspect that students highlighted was the need for more information during induction on the **different bursaries and grants** available to students. Rhona for example, did not know initially about the childcare funds available while several mentioned that they had not realized they could apply for disability funding through the university.

Summary

HN students' preparation

1. Only a few HN qualified interviewees thought that they had received enough support to enable them to make a successful transition to degree study as direct entrants, especially in relation to independent learning and various aspects of academic study.
2. HN courses have to serve the dual function of preparing students for the labour market as well as university but it is possible to improve students' preparation for degree study as the experience of a few students demonstrates.

3. Some interviewees criticised their college for failing to raise the option of articulation from an HNC to degree rather than staying on at college to take the HND.

Experience of pre-entry provision

4. Interviewees had found Open Days and Applicant Day visits useful; they appreciated being able to contact the university, other applicants and current students though social media.

5. Specific inputs for direct entrants in Open Days etc were suggested by HN students as well as early information and advice on academic learning to help them prepare.

6. The content and timing of pre-entry provision was perceived by some as too geared to school applicants.

7. Interviewees were very positive about the pre-entry programmes and summer schools run by their university. Where these programmes mixed different year groups, students wanted some separate activities for each.

8. Interviewees suggested that funding for these programmes should be increased so that more students could benefit from them.

Induction

9. Interviewees' experience of induction varied across and within universities and also varied depending on their year of entry.

10. While a few were extremely positive, more commonly interviewees had found some aspects of their induction less helpful than others or identified certain gaps.

11. Some mature students, including those in first year, found their induction overly focused on school leaver entrants and sometimes patronising.

12. A key issue for students was that their induction should enable them to get to know others on their course.

13. Direct entrants did not want to be mixed in with first years for any part of their induction. They wanted to be with other direct entrants entering the *same year* as them.

14. Direct entrants also wanted contact with existing students in their year to help them integrate; this could be done in class in the first week of the academic year. These classes could also include revision of key elements from the previous year

15. Interviewees suggested organising at least part of Induction on a more course/programme specific basis rather than across the whole school.

16. A frequent request from interviewees was for more specific information on course content especially in respect of the modules they would be studying.

17. Other suggestions to improve induction included more discussion of the various grants and bursaries available. For some students, meeting laboratory technicians and learning to set up equipment was suggested.

Chapter 4: Students' first year of study - challenges and support

This chapter reports on interviewees' experience of the transition to university and the challenges they had faced in their first year of degree study. As part of this we explore their interactions with and assistance from their lecturers and tutors. It was clear from the interviews that students across the different groups first thought in terms of support from lecturers and tutors before they mentioned their personal tutors and other designated support services. This is in line with the survey results. Thus this chapter covers the everyday teaching, learning and assessment experience of students and the ways in which staff responded. Following this we discuss the informal support students receive from their peers and conclude the chapter by considering the issue of students' integration with their fellow students and the university.

The challenges experienced by students in their first year of degree study

In this section we outline the various challenges and difficulties that interviewees faced in their first year of degree study. We present them separately in relation to different types of issues but, for the interviewees, the biggest challenge was having to deal with a variety of demands at the same time. The combined demands on some interviewees resulted in considerable stress.

Independent study and academic learning

The emphasis on independent study, the increased pace of learning, the volume of work and the assessment load that they encountered in their degree programme came as a shock to many students. This was true across the different student groups.

Jack, a first year student straight from school, described the volume of work on his course, especially the clustering of assessments (seven assessed pieces each week) as follows:

> "It's a bit mad…it's really hard work and in first-year where you're are also needing to make the social side work, it's difficult to manage." Standard quals 1st yr, Uni 1

Graham, a direct entrant to third year, had found his course even more difficult that he had expected:

> "It was very head-on, very challenging…I had to jump straight in ….a lot of work to take in as the pace is a lot faster than college. It was quite difficult to adapt. ..it took

time to find a study pattern that worked - you have to plan more hours to study the coursework ."HN 3rd yr Uni 1

The extent of independent learning expected of students was something that most found difficult. Nathan, an HN qualified student who had gone into second year, compared the emphasis on independent learning at university compared with college:

"The first [weeks] were a bit of a shock… As soon as I arrived here you can tell from the first lecture that this was going to be a lot more self-study and research and stuff… which is not a bad thing but it was a bit of a shock to the system. You learn a lot college but you don't need to know too much more than what you get taught." HN 2nd, yr Uni 2

Part of the challenge of independent learning was moving from a supportive environment with considerable levels of contact every day with lecturers, tutors or teachers to one in which they were expected to take responsibility for planning managing their own study with much reduced contact time with staff. Sophie explained that:

"[biggest challenge] was adjusting to a different style of learning and workload - more demanding and working with far less support, less tutor contact time than at college."
HN 2rd yr Uni 3

Nevertheless, while independent learning was a challenge for almost all students, a number of HN and school leaver entrants commented that once they became more used to it, they found it is a more productive way of learning, Nathan, for example, said:

"Here is the lecture, here is the slides, go and learn more. It took me a little while to get used to that but I feel it has allowed me to gain more knowledge…. So for classes that I am not 100 percent sure of at the beginning, it makes me learn more because I'm reading and doing my own research. I would not complain about any of that now whereas at the beginning I was like 'what is going on!'" HN 2nd, yr Uni 2

Most of the interviewees experienced difficulties related to various aspects of **academic learning** such as essay writing, researching, critiquing and the type of assessment but they were **much more of an issue for the HN qualified interviewees**. One reason was the different content, pedagogy and assessment of their HN course compared with their degree programme. As several students such as Sophie, Claire and Ed explained:

> *"The essays you do at college are completely different to the ones you do at uni...the deadlines, word count, referencing, research...the totally different way of writing assignments and the group presentations and assignments."* HN 2nd yr Uni 2

> *"[been difficult] not knowing how to write essays and lacking in academical writing practice... being critical in my assignments is something I have never been taught in college."* HN, 2nd yr Uni 1

> *"You do feel a bit behind because the university will do things differently to the way you have done them at college like writing reports and essays and presentations."* HN, 2nd yr Uni 3

However, an equally important reason HN qualified interviewees found academic learning more of a challenge than other students was because **all but one of them were direct entrants** to second or third year and as the survey findings demonstrated, students' **year of entry is critical** to their experience of degree study.

Students who enter first year are all starting out together where the expectations and demands are the same for all of them, they are '*all in it together*'. It is a very different situation for direct entrants such as Sarah, a direct entrant to third year who said, "*I started off on the back foot*'. Gill described the situation for direct entrants:

> *"I definitely think it's hard going in as a direct entrant. If you go in in first year, you're there with everyone else, they're helping you through. Everyone is in the same boat trying to integrate new into university life. Once you go straight into second year there is none of that. They just expect you to know, even though you have not been there. It's a bit tricky."* HN, 2nd yr, Uni 3

The first year of university is designed as something of a transitional year which recognises that first year students have to get used to a different learning environment with its particular expectations and ways of working. This is reflected in Ellie's summing up of her first year:

> *"I thought they were going through a ton of stuff at us and be like 'on you go learn it yourself' but they have been really good, and it was a good pace to learn stuff at."* Standard quals 1st yr Uni 2

In second and third year, however, the general expectation is that students will be familiar with the university environment and to have made considerable progress in developing the necessary academic skills. Jenny, an HN student, described her experience of starting in second year and having to work out *'how to be a student'*, something other HN interviewees

noted. She recognized that first year entrants also have to go through this process but pointed out that more allowances are made for students in their first year:

> "..coming straight into second year was a bit of a blow….you've not had the easing in gently in first year…I've had to learn this year how to be academic – how best to review my lecture notes, to critique and condense, how to organise my study space and have a better idea of what I need to be doing." HN, 2nd yr Uni 1

Other direct entrants also compared their experience to students who are started out in first year, Alan said:

> "[it's a challenge] coming in as a direct entrant and not having the same skills as those who done first year. ...It's also hard to know what and when you're supposed to do something as the tutors don't inform you as they expect you to know.. People who have been there for the start are gradually introduced to the difficulty and the way it all works." HN, 2nd yr, Uni 2

Third year entrants faced particular challenges. Direct entrants to both second and third year made the point that not doing so well in second year (or indeed in first year) does not matter in the same way as in third year when '*everything counts'*. Direct entrants to second year recognised that they had some leeway as they tried to get to grips with the standard of work required and had more time to develop the necessary skills and understanding for success. Claire, reflecting on her decision to leave college after her HNC to enter second year explained:

> "I'm so glad I went into second year rather than staying on and doing an HND and entering third year. It's such a different environment to get to grips with, so much self-study, formal exams. I never had any exams in my whole time at college. If I'd have gone into third year then this would be a lot more serious. Results from second year don't really count that much but from third year they do. Coming into second year gives yourself time to settle, to know the environment, to get used to more self-study." HN 2nd yr Uni 1

Robbie, another HNC entrant to second year, echoed this:

> "You can get away with finding your feet, getting your head round the system, getting your head round studying independently and, to a certain extent, you can kind of write off your grades from second year".

Nevertheless, none of the five interviewees who had entered third year said that they wished they had entered second year despite all their difficulties. Douglas expressed it thus:

> *"I'm actually not sure of that one myself, I could have applied for year 2 but I'd spent two years on the HND. I just wanted to hurry up and get a degree and work. I just wanted to get through as fast as I could. I cannot really say yes or no to that one. It's very difficult coming in in third year …I joined at the most stressful year…but at the same time I don't know how second-year might have gone. It might have been the same."*

Curricular match and assumed knowledge

Nineteen of the twenty HN students interviewed were direct entrants and it was very common for them to **identify gaps in their knowledge** because they had not covered some aspects of the second or third year of the degree course in their HNC/D. This was difficult as Daniel explained:

> *"The different teaching environment is easy to adapt to, the hardest part is lacking the knowledge other students would have learnt in first and second year."* HN, 3rd yr, Uni 2

Gill spoke of the mismatch between her college and university syllabus, in particular, the statistics she was expected to use in assessments in second year but which had been taught in the first year of the degree. This had been a real challenge for her:

> *"I thought 'Oh God, what am I doing here?' ....I just dragged myself through it at the time...I was just winging it to be honest, looking it up in books and online tutorials."* HN 2nd yr Uni 3

What concerned students much more, however, was **how staff dealt with any curricular gaps:** did they recognise and respond to this issue or leave students to catch up as best they could? A very common complaint from direct entrants was that they were not told what had been taught in previous year(s) and/or did not have easy and timely access to previous years' materials.

Where their university had well-established articulation links between certain degree programmes and HN courses at partner colleges, students were baffled that staff appeared to be unaware of what they had or had not covered in their HNC/D. Robbie, for example, was in this position, pointing out that although there was one module on the first year of the degree course that direct entrants had not covered, this was not highlighted to them. He commented:

"Surely the university knows what modules colleges teach so they can see what people know and what people maybe do not know…if you're going direct entry I think you need to at least be made aware this is what you are going to be learning." HN 2nd yr Uni 2

Students commented not only about curricular gaps but especially that **staff frequently forget about this**, that they 'assumed knowledge'. This was a very common experience for the direct entrants. Gill noted that even her personal tutor who is aware she is a DE student, forgot this during teaching and referred to work covered in first year:

"They know that there's direct entrants in the class you go to but they say 'you did this last year'. And I'm thinking 'no, I wasn't here last year'. I found that all the time." HN 2nd yr Uni 3

This issue of 'assumed knowledge' on the part of staff was a real frustration to most of the direct entrants but was something they came to expect and '*just got on with it*' as Alan explained:

"It happened quite a lot at university [assumed knowledge] but you just expect it. If there is something you do not know you need to research it yourself." HN 2nd yr Uni 2

Jenny also highlighted another impact of 'assumed knowledge' on the part of staff: that it tended to make direct entrants feel less integrated and somewhat marginalised when the lecturer or tutor made comments such as '*do you remember doing this in first year?*' failing to recognise that they had not been in first year.

She and several others pointed out that it is essential that academic staff are made aware that a proportion of the students they are teaching are direct entrants. Jenny emphasised that it is important that:

"The lecturers have a clearer understanding that there are X percent of people that are direct entrant students." HN 2nd yr Uni 1

Rhona thought that there is also a need to explain to staff about access courses such as SWAP and what this means, especially where they are not familiar with the Scottish education system.

Some of the direct entrants were **prepared to raise the issue of any gaps with staff**, others were reluctant to do so. Graham, for example, was 'ne*rvous about going to ask them*'. Sarah

felt staff on certain modules perceived direct entrants as poorly prepared and likely to fail which meant the students were unwilling to admit to not knowing about a topic:

> *"We didn't want to let it out that we didn't know what they were talking about because it would make it worse, they would just assume we know nothing." HN 3rd yr Uni 3*

Most of the direct entrants who did highlight issues about gaps in their knowledge and/or skills to staff found that they responded positively. The year co-ordinator of Jenny's course enabled her to access the research methods materials covered in the previous year of her course on the VLE:

> *"This was very helpful, you can see the build up to where we were." HN 2nd yr Uni 1*

Gill too had approached her tutor about gaps in knowledge and got access to first year course work on the VLE. The drawback was that it was access to the resources for the current first year students and only available in real-time as the materials became available. This meant she still did not have an overview of what her non direct entrant counterparts had covered on their course in the previous year.

Robbie described a situation where direct entrants emailed their tutor as a group to say they did not understand something. Their tutor met with them and '*pointed us in the right direction of how to learn the basics'*, then sat with them for a few weeks in the practicals to provide support. Robbie concluded that '*he got us through, it was a good experience'*. Similarly Sophie, who was very critical of the extent to which staff referred to work done in the previous year, found that when she and other direct entrants told their tutor they had not covered a particular aspect of statistics, the tutor responded well, sitting with them and talking them through it.

What is striking in direct entrants' accounts of **help from staff** is that in most cases it was **reactive** – it was done in response to specific requests from a student(s), frequently when s/he was struggling. Only a few recounted a different experience. Kieren, for example, explained how some of his lecturers did revision sessions at the beginning of third year to cover the key elements from second year that he and other direct entrants had missed. The approach taken not only enabled them to catch up in terms of course content but also helped them integrate with their fellow students as they worked in mixed groups:

> *"Some are quite involved in going over what they did in second year… eg in costing out building projects, in the first lesson he got us [DEs} to work in groups with other students and to do a project on it ...It was a good way to meet people. Other*

lecturers just make slides of second year available on [university's VLE] and you just have to do it yourself." HN 3rdyr Uni 1

As well as being reactive, assistance appeared to depend on the **initiative of individual members** of staff. Direct entrants generally spoke about particular members of staff giving assistance, for example, when Sarah spoke of the help from one lecturer who realised she and other direct entrants were struggling with how to find academic papers, she pointed out:

"If we'd not had that specific lecturer we'd have been even further behind".

Daniel described the help from one lecturer who ran sessions for direct entrants that covered areas such as Excel, referencing and Endnote that first and second years had already done and also made explicit how he wanted students to present their work. Daniel suggested that such sessions should be standard that staff are required to provide for direct entrants at the start of every year. He pointed out that they would also function as an optional 'refresher course' for other students:

"It should be compulsory to do what we got from that lecturer with regards to the format and stuff like that …I found it massively beneficial, even down to referencing. That's something I would never ever have looked at, I have never incorporated [it] into anything, never understood it to be honest with you… The first time in my life I'm throwing references into everything. And then when it came to the class with Duncan, he sat us down, had us on Microsoft Word, then he had one on Excel, then on structural analysis, and we got taught how to use it pretty comprehensively in a matter of one or two hours. And then the next week it was Endnote. Showed us how to use that from scratch. That was organised just by him. I would say it should even be a slight refresher course for everyone at the start of the year, you know." HN 3rd yr Uni 2

Robbie was one of the students who suggested that **curricular mapping and better alignment** between the HN and degree provision is needed. An additional aspect was highlighted by Sophie who argued that it is not just a case of HN students having gaps in their knowledge that need to be addressed - a deficit model - but that universities need to find out and recognise the knowledge and skills HN students come with:

"There needs to be more liaising with the college, understanding that direct entrants have different knowledge, they do not have no knowledge at all."

Another idea put forward by several interviewees was that universities (possibly in conjunction with colleges) should identify the key content and skills that direct entrants might have missed out on and **develop a 'crash course kit'** to enable them to catch up over the summer. As Martin expressed it, universities should:

> "Provide a 'crash course kit' for the summer explaining to direct entrants what they have missed and to prepare them… I was always fighting the current to catch up on what I'd missed." HN 2nd yr Uni 2.

A frequent suggestion from direct entrants was that they should have **access to the previous year(s) materials** over the summer. As we have reported both Jenny and Gill has managed to get access to some of the first year materials when on course but as Gill said:

> "It would help to be able to access the first year syllabus before, over the summer to see everything that's already been covered in first year." HN 2nd yr Uni 3

Related to this was the call for more information to be made available to direct entrants in advance about what their upcoming year would entail. Robbie commented:

> "If you are going direct entry I think you need to at least be made aware of what you are going to be learning…. It's something that could be done the summer before you start, saying that 'these are the modules you're going to be learning this year and as you are a direct entrant you may not have covered this. So if you don't know this, read up on it or just get a bit of information on it'." HN 2nd yr Uni 2

Alan suggested that in addition, including **examples of students' work from previous years** would be valuable:

> "Provide some sort of link to 'this is everything you can do this year, these are the modules and here is the outcome of the modules' and show what students have created. I think that gives a better idea of what you're going to be doing and it's a lot quicker. If you've seen the end result, you can get an idea of what you'll be doing." HN 2nd yr Uni 2

We have already reported students' suggestion that induction should include **a 'catch-up week' for direct entrants** at the beginning of the academic year which would also serve as a revision session for other students. This sort of provision was again raised as a way to familiarize direct entrants about the previous year(s) content.

Assistance and support from academic staff

We have noted that students perceive their lecturers and tutors as the members of staff to go to for assistance and in the interviews we discussed with them how **approachable and responsive staff** had been over their first year of study. Most of the students interviewed had found their lecturers and tutors approachable and spoke of emailing or speaking to them after a lecture or tutorial with queries, requests for feedback or if they did not understand something.

Kieren thought that that his college had overdone warnings about the inaccessibility of lectures at university:

> *"They made it seem like you would have to make appointments to see lecturers but it has not been like that, they're really good about talking to you after lectures, answering emails quickly or arranging to see them at short notice." HN 3ʳᵈ yr Uni 1*

Ellie had found staff 'friendly', quite easy to contact and that they:

> *"…always get back to you…they've sent dead helpful responses." SHEP school 1st yr Uni 2*

Claire, a second year direct entrant in University 1, reflected that staff were '*not as scary'* as she expected them to be so if she does not understand will ask the lecturer after class, or email him/her. One of the standard entrants to first year, Jack described his lecturers as having '*an open door policy'* and felt he could just '*knock on the door'* if he had any queries. Another standard entrant, Arif found it easier to talk to his tutors who are Ph.D. students about academic problems but did feel able to email his lecturers if necessary.

While students' views of staff were generally positive, some in each of the student groups **qualified their comments,** pointing out that staff varied in their '*approachability'* and helpfulness, in some cases noting that more senior members such as course leaders could be less helpful. Joanna referred to the '*awkwardness'* she and her fellow students felt in approaching staff if they did not understand something:

> *"… sometimes is quite difficult for us to do because some of the lecturers are very "on a pedestal" and it's difficult to get up to their level and try and talk to them about stuff. Or they say something that will make you feel a bit low.*
>
> *…and some of the lecturers…you sometimes just do not get that support and you would think with the smaller knit community we would, but sometimes you email*

someone and even though they are working that day won't reply to you until 3 weeks… And it is very difficult to get in touch with them." Standard quals 1ˢᵗ yr Uni 3

The key issue for Will was not so much whether staff were approachable but the size of tutorial and other groups. While he expected lectures to be large he was critical of what he described as 'lecture-like tutorials':

"The University could run more workshops and smaller groups so you could have more in-depth learning, it would be a more helpful environment as opposed to just another lecture type tutorial." Standard quals 1ˢᵗ yr Uni 1

Clarity of expectations and feedback

The extent to which staff were clear and comprehensive in their explanations about what was required in assignments and the standard they expected made a difference to students' experience of degree study. So too did the quality of feedback on their work. This was true for all students but was more acute for direct entrants since their fellow students in second or third year were more aware of requirements and staff tended to assume everyone knew what was expected of them by this point. Ed described his feelings of ***uncertainty about standards***:

"The unfamiliarity means that you're not sure if you are writing to university standard… there is a substantial jump but the most daunting thing would be 'am i doing this right?'. " HN 2ⁿᵈ yr Uni 3

Alan highlighted the difficulty of *'understanding what good looks like'* in respect of university work:

"The three worst module marks I got were all in the first [weeks] and I think that was just down to acclimatising to the new teaching environment but also the level of expectation, understanding what good looks like, but understanding that when you look at something through college eyes and think 'that is going to get me a 70' that is probably 45 at uni". HN 2ⁿᵈ yr Uni 2

Gill, a direct entrant to second year, spoke of '*not understanding what staff are looking for'*, not knowing what level of detail was required and worried about cramming the correct information into a small number of words. Her classmates who had been in first year were more aware of requirements and commented to her that their first year assessments had been more explicit about what was required in comparison with the second year

70

assessments. Having these explicit instructions in first year had helped them develop their understanding of what was required.

It seemed that **staff varied** in how well they explained **what they wanted in assignments** etc. Mike, for example, described some staff as being '*very clear*', others as '*clearish*' but with others:

> *"The expectations seem to evolve and the goalposts move…." SWAP 1st yr Uni 3*

A couple of interviewees made the point that while staff were happy to be contacted if they were not clear about they wanted in assessments, this is not really satisfactory: assessment requirements should be made clear from the outset. As Joanna put it:

> *"You have to go to them if you want help instead of them trying to help everyone out by being less vague." standard quals 1st yr Uni 3*

The experience of several other interviewees, however, was different. Several mentioned staff going over assessment requirements in lectures, Alan, for example, noted that staff were usually very clear about what they were looking for, usually providing a brief which they explained in a lecture with examples from previous years of assessment outcomes. Nathan commented that:

> *"I've not had an assessment where I have never known what to hand in. They're very clear with the marking guidelines as well so you know what they are marking. So yeah, I got nothing bad to say about that." HN 2nd yr Uni 2*

Feedback is a common area of student dissatisfaction in many universities and one which institutions are trying to develop, for example, setting specific timescales within which students should receive feedback. With very few exceptions, the interviewees had found the **extent and timeliness of their feedback variable.** Janet was one of the exceptions, describing feedback on her course as '*really good and on time*':

> *"It used to surprise me that they [staff] could fit everything in because they put a lot of feedback on my essays and they would have feedback sessions before and after the exams, and they would go over everything to make sure everyone had the best chance of learning from it." HN 2nd yr Uni 2*

Much more typically, interviewees described feedback on their courses as varied: good in some parts of the course but '*very limited*' in others, as Sophie said:

"...some will just write the bare minimum of stuff, but the others have been more informative so that has been really good." HN 2nd yr Uni 2

Nathan commented that his feedback was *'good and constructive'*, but added *'when we got it'*. Joanna thought the feedback she had received was inadequate and *'not enough for you to improve'*. Robbie pointed out that while feedback was *'meant to be three weeks'* it was often delayed, but that staff failed to keep students updated on timescales. He also noted that where some part-time staff *'outsourced their marking'* to colleagues, the result was the feedback *'was sparing'*:

"It's inevitable that if you're marking on a module that you are not teaching, it's probably not going to be your priority." HN yr 2 Uni 2

Several students recognized the pressures staff could be working under. Adam noted that on his course two members of staff were available to provide feedback to 30 students in a three hour period and the result was that there often *'wasn't time to feedback to everyone'*.

University VLE systems

A number of interviewees noted that they were sometimes advised to use the university's VLE to check course information such as assessment requirements or to access academic support resources. In two of the universities, however, the VLE was a source of frustration to a number of them as the following quotations from a student at each of them show.

Robbie described the difficulty he had encountered trying to find the resources on academic writing he needed on the VLE, this was 'not obvious', that he had to 'dig around' on it:

"It's kind of a sprawling mess...when things take more than three steps people have lost interest. If someone is panicking about what they need to do they don't want to spend the afternoon clicking a link and crossing their fingers." HN 2nd yr Uni 2

Mike's advice was that if the university wants students to make use of the resources on the VLE they should *'do something about it!'*:

"The [VLE] here is horrendous. The one at x College was idiot proof whereas this one... very small text, not user-friendly at all..., not suited to mobiles. I'm dyslexic ... I get really frustrated and lose focus easily going on the [VLE] and having multiple different tabs, multiple different places to find one piece of information. I just give up and 90% of our class did the same. I'm not technically minded, I just believe it could be a lot better. The essence of what they want is there but it's not working.

Streamline it. To have announcements for everyone - even if you're first year you get announcements for the upper years. What's the point?" SWAP 1ˢᵗ yr Uni 3

Finance, part–time work and time management

Most of the students interviewed felt under some degree of financial pressure and around a third of them had a paid job as a way to fund their studies. Their working hours ranged from around 10 up to 30 or more a week. Most of the other interviewees had made a conscious decision not to work during the academic year so they could concentrate on their studies but were planning to do so during the summer holidays. A number of them had tried to build up savings through previous employment or holiday work.

The ***impact of*** having a paid ***job during term time*** did seem to ***vary*** quite a lot across the interviewees, it was a considerable problem for around half of those working. Ed, a second year direct entrant, had missed exams in his first semester due to his work and said he is *'always chasing'* to catch up with this studies. One of the first year students, Rosie, worked shifts which sometimes meant she did not finish work until 5am, leaving her very tired for days afterwards with negative effects on her university studies. But several others with a job did not think that it had impacted on their studies *'too much'* or that although it had been difficult at first, they had worked out a way to balance their studies and part-time job. Where a student such as Robbie was trying to balance his studies, paid work and family life, this could be *'tricky'*, his approach was to study *'little and often'*.

While ***students' financial situation*** is largely determined by national student funding arrangements and their own personal circumstances, the interviews suggest that there are a few ways universities could assist them in relation to finance and, relatedly, the management of their various activities/responsibilities.

One way universities can help is ***providing information in advance*** so students can make informed decisions. In Joanna's case she had been trying to decide which would be the least expensive option: to live at home and commute or stay in university accommodation. She did leave home and move into university halls but then discovered she did not have timetabled classes every day so she would have been better off financially if she had continued to live at home and travel in on the days she did have classes. While it may not have been possible to provide Joanna with a detailed timetable in advance of starting, it would have been useful if she had been given some guidance about the balance of timetabled classes and independent study. Another example was Alan who once on course

found out he would have to buy expensive equipment. He suggested that students should be notified about this in advance of starting so they could save for this. He had to apply to the university for discretionary funding to help him cover the costs of equipment. As we have referred to a number of times, the students interviewed wanted more detailed information before they started their course and this is another aspect of it and these suggestions for more information related to financial planning are another aspect of this.

In the section covering induction, we have already noted that students thought more information on different sources of financial support would be useful and that during induction, students should be able to speak to someone about the different funds and bursaries that are available.

Several interviewees suggested that it would help them manage their various activities - studies, work and sometimes family responsibilities – if staff **avoided making last minute changes or requests to students**. When discussing balancing her part time job with her university work, Sarah commented that this could be especially difficult because:

> *'The university expects students to be available to come in at short notice'. HN 3rd yr Uni 3*

Although time management was an issue for a number of the interviewees, it seemed that most had **not raised this with their personal tutor**. Only one of the interviewees mentioned trying to discuss how best to manage her part-time job alongside her university work. In this case, the outcome for the student, Rosie, was unsatisfactory, she remarked he:

> *'…didn't seem interested in discussing the matter'. Standard quals 1st yr Uni 2*

Informal support from other students

The survey highlighted the extent to which other students were a source of advice and support for individuals and this was also very evident in the interviews with students. This is one of the reasons why it is important that students are well integrated into their course. Most of the interviewees would **first turn to fellow students** if they did not understand something and spoke of '*bouncing ideas off each other*', discussing how to approach assignments, exchanging notes, references and texts they had found and '*peer reviewing each others' work*'. Some students took this informal support system for granted but others were more aware of it. When asked what advice he would give anyone thinking about university, Jack replied:

"I'd tell them that everyone finds it hard so find someone on your course to support you through the hard work." Standard quals 1st yr Uni 1

He went on:

"Definitely grasp all the opportunities you are given, it comes back to socially, if someone in halls asks you to do something, go and do it because it's how you make friends who will support you all through the work."

None of the interviewees had taken part in an official student peer mentoring scheme but where they had the opportunity to make friends with **students in upper years** through societies such as sports, drama and music, they found this especially helpful. Will, who had made friends in upper years through his membership of two different societies said:

"They [friends in the year above] are better because they have just done it." SIMD 20,1st yr Uni 1

Another first year student, Evie had found students from upper years helpful:

"Ever since I have been here…the older ones have been so helpful. We all talk about what we have done….what is the best thing to do. The second years are good because they went through it quite recently they tell us 'well you'll be doing this next year'." SHEP school 1st yr Uni 2

While recognising that some students may not want, or may not have the time, to join clubs and societies, it is clear that it does offer informal mentoring opportunities, and is something personal tutors and others might suggest to new entrants. Certainly Will's advice to prospective students was to join any society that interested them so they could:

"Expand your group of people you know as quickly as possible so that way you have as much support as you want when it comes to the educational side of things." SIMD 20/40 1st yr Uni 1

Facebook played a central part in this informal support as Carlie explained:

"There's also a group chat for the course…it involves everyone on the course and you can send stuff on that and ask questions…also when you're working in groups on a project, [you] can also set up group chat that involves everyone. It's up to the group but it's the easiest way to speak to everyone." HN 3rd yr Uni 1

Martin also highlighted Facebook as being where a lot of peer support is done, an approach which suited him well:

"That [Facebook group] is a good help because you kind of remind each other of things. There is five students in our group. Always pushes us to do better, sharing ideas and stuff like that. Whereas I do not really like sharing ideas in the big group, just 'cause I do not really know everyone." HN 2nd yr Uni 2

He suggested that the university should make a point of highlighting the importance of social media and especially Facebook to prospective and current students:

"…should also let students know that they'll struggle if they don't use Facebook because it's where a lot of peer support is done." HN 2nd yr Uni 2

Although Facebook enabled Martin to interact with only a small group of other students, a situation he was more comfortable with, a few interviewees were not happy studying with others. This is illustrated by Adam, a first year entrant who explained that he does not feel able to study with other students because of his dyslexia:

"I tend to work alone because I feel slightly embarrassed about writing something down and I can't even spell simple words. I would feel embarrassed and silly that I can't do that and they're busy writing away. I can do it if I do wee bits at a time but I wouldn't be able to write in one big go. If they asked me to read theirs that's a big red flag for me. It is all about not wanting to look silly, just not being able to read what they're saying." SHEP school 1st yr Uni 2

Given the importance of informal support from peers, the extent to which students are integrated into their course is clearly a critical issue and we now move on to consider the interviewees' experience in this regard.

Integration issues

Challenge for direct entrants

A number of the direct entrants interviewed recounted difficulties in integrating with the existing students on their course who had already got to know each other in previous year(s) and already formed their friendship or study groups. Claire who had entered second year at university 1 had found her first semester '*difficult*' explaining that '*everyone was already quite close*', in addition at 29 she was older than many of them with a different attitude to her studies. By the second semester, she was '*getting on OK with them*' but noted they had different priorities. Sophie had found integration a considerable challenge:

> *"Of course when you go into second year, the people from before they have all made friends…when we [were] first there they did not really talk to anyone. It was hard to get to know people because you kind of feel like an outsider." HN 2nd yr Uni 2*

Sophie and Claire had started in second year. Sarah had, however, entered third year and described a particularly difficult time she and other direct entrants had trying to integrate with the existing students:

> *"Everyone has their little cliques. The people who had known each other for two years weren't really willing to meet new people.… Everyone would sit together and we would be left where there were seats." HN, 3rd yr, Uni 3*

However, the experience of several other direct entrants was more positive. For Graham it had been '*OK to make friends*' and that being '*allocated to groups for project work* 'helped:

> *'It's easy to befriend people in this way. But you have to make an effort, you just have to push yourself out there a bit more" HN 3rd yr Uni 1*

Graham had found the other students on his course helpful:

> *"It's good to know they'll help you out. They're not going to joke about it or criticise you for it. They understand and say 'you weren't here, you missed that bit '."*

The experience of integration recounted by two other interviewees was very similar to that of Graham. Kieren and Daniel also had a positive response from the existing students and found it reasonably easy to integrate. All three students were on the same type of course although at two different Universities. Their experience may be related partly to the proportion of direct entrants on the course but this can only be part of the explanation since interviewees on another course with a significant number of direct entry students, did not share this positive experience. Of course, an important factor in their successful integration is very likely to be their own personal traits but another part of the explanation may well be that the approaches used by staff, for example, how group work is designed, helped to promote their integration.

Other factors affecting integration: age and living arrangements

Undoubtedly being a direct entrant was extremely significant in terms of how easy or difficult students found it to integrate and make friends but several other factors were also important: their age and/or whether they lived in halls/on campus or had to spend a considerable time commuting between home and university.

Students' ***age made quite a difference*** to their experience of integration regardless of whether they were direct entrants or not. The older students were also much more likely to have family responsibilities and this added a further constraint on their time and therefore on their ability to integrate. Mike and Matt, for example, who had both entered first year from a SWAP course had each found the '*social aspect harder than expected*', that the younger students, often straight from school, had different priorities from themselves at around 30, both with partners and children.

Donal, an HN qualified student who started in first year ie was not a direct entrant, nevertheless pointed out that he was the only mature student on his course and although the other students were' *friendly enough*', he could *'feel quite alone'*. Another older student, Gill, who was a direct entrant described university as *'solitary'* partly because of the time she spent commuting but also because of her age, saying this made her feel like '*outsider*':

> "*Because I'm so much older [age 41] I go in with a different mindset. Younger students are there for the social life as well. I am just there to do my degree, social life is a bonus but my priority is study.*" HN 2nd yr Uni 3

Janet was another older student with a ***long commute*** (two hours each way) who highlighted the impact of this on getting to know other students and the possibility of informal peer support:

> "*Travel more than anything dictated what I did….because of the travel time I didn't want to spend all that time being part of a study group or socialising or anything… I want to leave as soon as possible to get the next bus back.*" HN 2nd yr Uni 2

If personal and financial circumstances permitted it, staying in university halls rather than being at home and commuting was generally seen as a good way to make friends; those who had done so were positive about this.

A point that struck us when analysing the interviews, was that young first year entrants who had time-consuming commutes to/from university did not seem to have the same difficulty in terms of integration and informal support as did older and/or direct entrants. While they did say that they missed out on some social activities to an extent, they all seemed to be well integrated into their course and spoke of studying with others. Arif who had a two-hour bus and train journey from home to university had found making friends easier than expected, including making friends with students living in university halls and said that he

studied with others in the library. Similarly, although Ellie noted restrictions on socialising because of commuting from the West of Scotland (and her weekend work) she also described studying with other students, testing each other and reading over each other's work - important to her since she ' *learns better with friends'*.

Being a direct entrant, age and spending significant time travelling to/from university are each factors that impact on integration and students' informal support but they appear to vary in their effect in different combinations.

Interviewees' **SIMD status** did not seem to make a difference to their integration. This echoes the survey findings and contrasts with a recent study of widening participation (WP) students at the University of Edinburgh where many WP students, (and some state educated non-WP students) thought that the social make-up of the University had an impact on the extent to which they felt integrated and part of the University (Minty 2016). None of the interviewees from SIMD 20/40 neighbourhoods expressed similar views. Emma at University 1 from a SIMD 20 background and first in her family to go to university commented *'I feel super comfortable here'.* Similarly, Ellie, also from a SIMD 20 postcode described her reaction when she visited University 2 on an Open Day: *'I felt like I belonged there'.*

We have already reported interviewees' suggestions that **more attention** should be paid in induction and the initial week(s) of the academic year to helping students integrate, especially supporting the integration of direct entrants with existing students. We also noted in a previous section the value of a mixed group project where direct entrants worked with existing students to review the previous years' work.

In addition to this, several interviewees highlighted the importance of considering **how tutorial and other groups are constituted** since this can help or hinder integration. Is it a self-allocation system or are students assigned to groups? If the latter, on what basis is this done? Jenny thought that the way in which tutorials on her course were organized inhibited integration:

> *"Tutorial group are always arranged in alphabetical [order] so you're always with the same people, there should be different ways of mixing to get opportunities to work with others." HN 2nd yr Uni 1*

Several students such as Jonathan and Jack had found that being assigned their laboratory partners meant they did not simply chose someone they already knew so that:

"It means that you end up in different groups of people and they have ended up becoming close friends as well" standard 1ˢᵗ yr Uni 1

Another feature that several students thought helped integration was where their programme area had a **study/resource centre specifically for students** on these courses. Graham described how students had to swipe into the resource centre which had a small specialist library, software and other resources. He thought a dedicated resource such as this helped promote '*a feeling of belonging*'. Jack who was studying in a different field but who had access to similar provision, described this as '*really good*' and as helping to build '*a strong student group*'.

Summary

Independent study and academic learning
1. The emphasis on independent study, increased pace of learning, volume of work and assessment load came as a shock to most interviewees as did the reduced level of contact with staff compared with school or college.

2. Most of the interviewees had difficulties with various aspect of academic learning but they were more difficult for HN students. One reason was the different content, pedagogy and assessment of their HN course.

3. Equally important, however, was that virtually all of the HN interviewees had gone into second or third year when it was generally expected that students had developed the necessary skills and understanding during first year.

4. Direct entrants to third year faced particular challenges given the standard of work expected and the contribution of third year exam results towards their final degree.

Curricular match and assumed knowledge
5. Direct entrants frequently noted 'curricular gaps' where content taught in earlier year(s) of the degree had not been covered in their HN.

6. They were frustrated that staff frequently forgot this and instead 'assumed knowledge' including on degrees with well-established articulation links with the HN course.

7. A further impact of staff of 'assumed knowledge' was to make direct entrants feel less integrated.

8. Interviewees suggested awareness raising among teaching staff of the number and experience of direct entrants and SWAP students

9. Some direct entrants were unwilling to highlight curricular gaps to staff but where they did, staff responded positively. But this help was usually *reactive,* in response to students' requests and depended on the individual member of staff.

10. Interviewees suggested curricular mapping to improve the alignment of HN and degree provision.

11. They also called for universities to develop 'a crash course kit' covering the key content/skills direct entrants may have missed for them to use once accepted; also to give them access to previous year(s) materials and examples of students' work.

12. A catch-up/revision week at the beginning of the academic year as standard practice was again suggested.

Assistance and support from academic staff

13. Students perceived their lecturers and tutors as the staff members to go to for assistance before their personal tutors. Interviewees were generally positive about their response although staff varied in their 'approachability' and helpfulness.

14. The extent to which staff provided clear explanations about assignments, the standard expected and comprehensive feedback all made a difference to the interviewees' experience. This was especially important to direct entrants.

15. Staff varied in how well they explained requirements. Several interviewees highlighted good practice.

16. With very few exceptions, the interviewees had found feedback on their work to be variable: sometimes good but sometimes very limited and not sufficient to help them improve.

University VLE systems

17. Most interviewees, in two of the Universities, found it difficult to access information and academic support resources on the VLE and suggested a major overhaul.

Finance, part–time work and time management

18. Most of the interviewees felt under financial pressure; around a third had a paid job during term time with working hours ranging from 10 to over 30 hours a week.

19. The impact of this employment varied across the interviewees; it was a considerable problem for around half of those working.

20. Students' financial situation is largely determined by national funding arrangements and a student's personal circumstances but the interviewees suggested several ways their University could help them manage their finances and balance their various time commitments.

Informal support

21. Other students were the key source of advice and support for interviewees – one reason why it is important that students are well integrated into their course.

22. None of the interviewees had taken part in peer mentoring schemes; some had made friends with students in upper years through clubs etc and they provided useful advice.

23. Social media, especially Facebook, played a central role in students' informal peer support.

Integration issues

Bearing in mind that the extent to which students integrate successfully into their course and university will be influenced by their own personal traits, the interviews nevertheless highlighted other relevant aspects.

24. A common difficulty for direct entrants was integrating into an already established year group. In a few cases, the teaching approaches used by staff had encouraged students to mix.

25. Older interviewees found it harder to integrate irrespective of whether they were direct entrants.

26. Having a long commute to/from university had a negative effect on interviewees' integration. This, however, did not have the same impact on younger students' integration compared with mature students.

27. Coming from an area classified as deprived made no difference to how well interviewees felt integrated into their course and university.

28. Allocating students to group projects, tutorials etc was seen as helping to encourage mixing and integration.

29. Interviewees who had access to a dedicated study/resource centre for their school or programme area thought this helped promote a sense of belonging.

Chapter 5: Students' experience of the formal support services

This chapter considers students' experience of the formal support services at their university. We would emphasis again that this is only part of the support that students access, the others being the everyday assistance from academic teaching staff and the informal support from their fellow students.

The personal tutor system

As reported in Chapter 2, the survey findings indicate that the personal tutor system is not operating well, especially for HN students and, in particular, for those who are direct entrants. Only 45% of HN qualified students had met with their personal tutor in their first semester while 72% of other students had done so. It also found that 19% of HN students did not know that they had a personal tutor compared with a very small percentage of the other students (4%). However, the survey also highlighted that those students who *did* have a meeting(s) had found it helpful and this was true for students across the different categories. A similar picture emerges from the interviews with students.

The students interviewed roughly divide into ***around half who were aware*** they had a personal tutor and knew his/her name and the ***other half or so who did not know*** or were very vague about it.

Reasons for not meeting

Typically the students who knew of their personal tutor described receiving an email from him/her inviting them to arrange or to attend a meeting if they wanted to '*to chat or discuss any issues they were having'.* Some took up the invitation but others did not. On the one hand, Jenny and Kieren felt they did not need to because they were in contact with other student support in the university such as the disability service. This, as Jenny said '*was enough'* without going to her personal tutor. On the other hand, Nathan and Rhona stated that they were more likely to approach a lecturer or course co-ordinator/programme leader with whom they felt more familiar.

Several had been in email contact with their personal tutor but had not had a face-to-face meeting, partly because of time pressures but also because they did not perceive a need since they did not have any particular problems. Arif was one of these students. He

explained his time was limited due to a long commute and did see any need to meets since he was *'getting on ok'* so he just emailed his personal tutor:

> *"I don't really see the need [to meet]…obviously you have to communicate and tell them how you're doing but you don't need to ring up and make an appointment."*

Lack of clarity about the role of the personal tutor

The perception that they did not need to meet or even be in contact with their personal tutor if they were not having major problems was common among the interviewees. Ellie, for example, who had not been in contact with her PT said she would do so if she was '*really struggling.'* Alan had been to see his personal tutor on several occasions but thought that this was the reason other students on his course had not done so:

> *"Students who're performing well in class probably feel like they don't need to meet with them [PT] but they can advise on any problems you're maybe having."*

This view of personal tutors as being someone to go to only in difficulty related to a lack of awareness or uncertainty about the personal tutor's role and the purpose of a regular meeting among quite a number of the interviewees. Even a student such as Jonathan who had himself arranged a meeting with his PT as a requirement of one of his courses was still unsure about the role of his personal tutor asking whether he was there '*to help if you have real problems with your coursework?*'

Nevertheless Jonathan thought that requiring students to set up a meeting with their personal tutor as part of this course (aimed at developing academic related skills) was a good approach and had meant that:

> '*I know now who my PT is and where to find him.' Standard 1st yr Uni 1*

A few of the students interviewed thought they had a good understanding of what their personal tutor was there for; Mike described this as:

> *"Just like mediation between what you feel and so on about the uni. Not just about the uni, but lecturers, or any sort of issues, maybe even just a general chat. Get something off your chest." SWAP 1st yr Uni 3*

Being familiar with their personal tutor is important

What was evident from the interviews was that having some familiarity with the person who was their personal tutor made a difference: it meant s/he was not a total stranger but

someone they recognized and who knew something of them and their work. Daniel said that because his personal tutor was one of his lecturers it '*made it easier*' to met him. Evie explained that her personal tutor is one of her lecturers so he knows her work and '*how I'm doing*'. *At* the start of each trimester he sent out a timetable of when he was available and she had signed up to meet him each time. She said:

> "At first I didn't have much to say but after the Christmas break I had loads to say, . Yeah [it helped] because he does take me for the module that I'm struggling with, he knows, he is more aware of it. But when I saw them in trimester 2 he was like, 'you've come on so much from September. Knowing that made me feel a lot better." SHEP school 1st yr Uni 2

Similarly, Carlie was glad that her personal tutor was also one of her academic tutors so '*I feel I can just email or go to if I've any queries*'. They mainly talk about her project work but also:

> "It's a time to go over anything [you] need to ask, if there's any problems he's quite good at fixing things." HN 3rd yr Uni 1

Will, a first year student at the same university as Carlie recounted a different experience of the personal tutor system. He had not been assigned one till five weeks into his course, he had never seen him, receiving his exam results by email. He said the only reason he would go to see his personal tutor was if he failed some exams and then it would be only to complete the necessary administrative arrangements not for any discussion. He contrasted his experience with that of friends on a different course at the same university and suggested that the approach taken on this course should be the model for the PT system:

> They have small groups with their [PTs]…. it would be much more of an advantage … You could know your PT and your PT could know you, like, how you work over the course of your time at uni." SIMD 20 1st yr Uni 1

This was, in fact, Jack's experience in his first year at the same university as Will. His personal tutor is also his academic tutor, he has weekly meetings with four or five students and while the purpose is to do maths and physics problem sheets, it means students and the personal tutor develop a relationship with each other:

> "The group sessions are more for going through the problems but you do get to know them and they know where you're at… I certainly feel that I could knock on his door any time if I did have an issue."

The need for a system that enables students and personal tutors to know each other was evident from Sarah's account: she had previously had email contact with her personal tutor but when she met him in the corridor '*he didn't know who I was*'. This lack of recognition clearly had an impact on her, leaving her feeling undermined and she argued that students need to be able to have more of a relationship with their personal tutor. One way to do this Sarah suggested, would be to make the initial meeting compulsory:

> *"You should have compulsory meeting with the PT at the beginning so have a relationship and [you] would contact PT when necessary … it would have been good to [meet] him and then have had that working relationship through university but because it was only encouraged and I had so much else in mind, I was trying to learn everything, that I just did not have the time to meet."*

The interviewees were **divided** as to the merits of at least **initial meetings being compulsory**, Daniel was one of the students who did not think it 'would help' but suggested that more could be done to promote awareness among students of the role of personal tutors and the purpose of meetings.

Graham, a direct entrant, also commented on the organisation of the personal tutor system. He noted that he and other direct entrants on his course were allocated to the same lecturer as their personal tutor. He thought having the same person for all DEs, was helpful: someone aware of, and sympathetic to, the particular challenges encountered by students who started their degree in second or third year.

Opinion of personal tutors meetings mainly positive

Mirroring the survey findings, most of the students who had met their personal tutor thought it had been helpful. Donal said he had seen his personal tutor regularly, commenting:

> *"He's a good lad, very nice and easy to talk to… has given really good advice – general stuff about university life."* HN 1st yr Uni 1

Daniel was also positive about his personal tutor with whom he had been in regular contact; his judgment was:

> *"[he'] been pretty good, they're willing to help and listen to students' problems."* HN 3rd yr Uni 2

Robbie and Matt both had serious personal matters which they had discussed with their respective personal tutors and each spoke of how supportive they had been. Matt commented:

> *"[he's] been really understanding and tried to find ways to support me". SWAP 1st yr Uni 2*

Graham, a third year direct entrant at university 1 noted that his personal tutor was '*always happy to help'*, he had met him twice in his first semester and had received regular emails checking on his progress and encouraging him to come in for a chat if he *'was struggling'*. Gill who suffers from a chronic health condition had met regularly with her personal tutor as well as her disability adviser. Overall she described the response to her situation as '*great, more than helpful',* and remarking that her personal tutor was:

> *"…reassuring that it's not the end of the world. If you're not going on at some points they will give you feedback." HN 2nd yr Uni 3*

In view of the support she was receiving from her personal tutor, Gill was among the interviewees who advocated making PT meetings mandatory, she felt that otherwise students are missing out on potential help:

> *"… they should meet you once a semester no matter what, [should be] compulsory just to have a 5-10 minute chat every semester. Lots of people will not meet with them and it could be really helpful." HN 2nd yr Uni 3*

Joanna had experienced considerable challenges in her first semester in terms of getting used to being at university and aspects of her course such as essay writing. She had met with her personal tutor three times which had been 'really helpful' and she had also suggested Joanna make use of the university's academic learning support where she had received individual support:

> *"I went through quite a bit in semester one, and my personal tutor was there for me throughout it. They point you in the right direction as to who to go to… We have an [academic learning support service] and I got pointed towards them and they were really helpful." Standard quals 1st yr Uni 3*

Although Joanna was well integrated into her course and had informal support from friends and family she appreciated also having a personal tutor:

> *"It's nice to talk to someone about first year and how it's going and about proper university stuff. Sometimes you can talk to your parents and your friends about it*

but it's not the same as talking to someone who's at the university. [It's] good to talk to friends but it's also good to have the PT there." Standard quals 1st yr Uni 3

The idea that it **was reassuring** to *'have someone there if they're needed'* was quite a common remark by the interviewees who knew that they had a personal tutor. In Janet's case, her personal tutor had set up a meeting because she had missed some classes and this was something she had appreciated. As someone who had found the move from a small college to a large university difficult, Janet found it reassuring to have someone with a specific remit to support students*:*

"It makes a difference especially as one person in a big class, to know someone is there for you. It's better than going to a lecturer as you know that's their role." HN 2nd yr Uni 2

Nevertheless, **not all students** had found their **contact with their personal tutor helpful.** Martin, a second year direct entrant at university 2 said that his personal tutor was very unapproachable and when he did meet with him to discuss a particular issue relating to assessment had just been 'fobbed off'. Martin's view was that even allowing for the fact that personal tutors are very busy they still '*don't seem that caring'*. Rosie had a similar opinion of her personal tutor recounting how she had tried to discuss balancing her part-time work and study but that:

"she didn't seem interested…I don't think she cared that much at all. I feel as if the personal tutors… but they are meant to care and I just don't think they care that much." Standard quals 1st yr Uni 2

Rosie did seem to be someone who was experiencing considerable difficulties with her academic work, finances and emotional health but, from her perspective, the personal tutor system was not working for her. She did, however, comment very favourably on the financial advice she had received from the student support centre.

Student support services

When asked about which university support services they were aware of and/or had used (in addition to their personal tutor), academic/study skills support and disability services were the two areas most frequently mentioned by the students interviewed. Most were generally aware of the one-stop student support centre in their university which offered

information, advice and support on a range of topics. Awareness of peer employer mentoring schemes was poor.

Academic learning support

Most, although not all, of the interviewees were aware in a general way of workshops and classes run by their university to provide help with different academic and study skills. Students at one of the universities seemed to be particularly aware of them and commented on the extent to which they were advertised and highlighted in class by lecturers.

Claire, who had attended sessions on referencing and note-taking, thought they were a great resource '*for people from college'* and demonstrated that the University took account of the needs of entrants from college:

> *"it shows that the University understands that coming from college you might not know everything…the University recognises that there are gaps which is a really good thing." HN 2nd yr Uni 1*

The other interviewees at University 1 knew of the academic skills workshops but either found the scheduling of them inconvenient or did not think they needed to attend. It was clear that several of them had weighed up the time involved compared to their need, as Jack said:

> *"'I can't convince myself that they'd be useful enough to spend this time on". Standard quals 1st yr Uni 1*

Another first year student at University 1, Jonathan, suggested that as well as offering workshops etc. it would be useful if some of the materials could be integrated into lectures at relevant points throughout the course when the students could see the relevance and would not need to find additional time to go to workshops.

Overall those who had **attended academic support workshops(s) had found them helpful.** Several had received assistance on a one-to-one basis from the academic learning support at their university and had found this very helpful and highlighted the difference it had made to their work and consequently to their grades. Robbie said of his session with an adviser:

> *"it helped me tremendously because before I did not do that many written submissions because it is mostly practicals [on HND]. So there's a few but I always had really bad marks for reports because I just did not know how to report write.*

Then I met with this guy and he told me how to write a report and then how to reference things. The next report I did got really good marks, just from that two hours. …

Suddenly I knew things I could do right like formatting and referencing, just basic things like not writing in the first person… So maybe it would be good if that was compulsory." HN 2nd yr Uni 2

In addition to input from the academic support staff through workshops or individual help, the interviewees frequently mentioned **library staff** who were seen as accessible and *'always helpful'*.

Disability support

Nearly a third of the interviewees had received support in relation to a disability, most commonly dyslexia. This frequently involved academic learning support as well as the disability service and in some cases the student's personal tutor. The students concerned were unanimously positive about the help they had received.

Most had contacted the disability service in advance of starting university or at the very beginning of the academic year. Several mentioned hearing about the provision during a summer pre-entry programme or at induction. Typically students described meeting with an adviser or educational psychologist who assessed how they learned and were then provided with appropriate resources such as software programmes, coloured paper, recorders to assist them and in some cases they extra time and/or a scribe in exams. Several had access to a support tutor to assist them, for example, by looking over their assignments or helping them develop their study strategy or revision plan. All of them were clear that the support had made a difference to their confidence and their progress. Ellie said:

"I worried whether I would be able to keep up with all the work…and I'm dyslexic. The dyslexic support has been really good and have helped me improve my essays. I was just passing them but now getting high 50s and stuff." SHEP school 1st yr Uni 2

Carlie, a third year direct entrant at University 1, said that her disability adviser had *'got everything sorted out'* in terms of support for her dyslexia; she had just recently received new software and a recorder from the adviser which has *'really helped'*. She had also had considerable support throughout the year from her lecturers and personal tutor to help her

through a family issue. Overall she thought that the university could not have been more supportive, stating *'I could not have picked a better university'.*

Another third year direct entrant at University 1, Kieren, explained that he had received extra funding for a support tutor and her assistance was '*very useful'*. He had an allocation of 10 hours and met with her regularly to go over whatever he wanted help with at that point. At the time of his interview, for example, she had been helping him work out a study programme for his upcoming exams.

In Gill's case, she had been hoping to manage a chronic health condition without support as she had done at college but found it harder to do so as a direct entrant to second year at university 3. She disclosed her condition to her personal tutor and her course leader who advised her to meet with the disability service and she now has an individual learning plan. Arrangements have been made so that she can do some of her work for the next academic year over the coming summer to '*make things easier for third year'.* Gill was pleased to have a plan in place if her condition '*goes downhill at any point'.* In her view, staff '*couldn't have done more'* and have been '*more than helpful'.*

A number of the students were receiving the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) from SAAS and this was critical to their support. Several of them thought that their university could have provided more information and advice to students with a disability to help them apply for the DSA. Adam, for example, had not realised he could apply for DSA through the university.

> *"One thing I would say, see the DSA Allowance thing… I thought it was to do with SAAS…. I didn't realise you could go to the uni and fill it in to the uni… So, there's that aspect that could be improved, letting students know better that if you didn't apply with DSA with SAAS you can still apply here with the uni." SHEP school 1st yr Uni 2*

At the time of interview, Adam was also wondering what support he would be able to access in second year and suggested the need for continuity of dyslexia support across years:

> *"keep the same person interacting with them, cos then that person knows your needs and the student doesn't have to explain it to five different staff members." SHEP school 1st yr Uni 2*

Student support centre

The other provision that most interviewees were aware of even if they had not used it was the one-stop student support centre which offered information, advice and support on a range of topics (these had different names in each university). Rhona, a SWAP student at University 1 had used the centre there describing staff as '*really great, they provide advice on anything'*. Rosie at university 2 had found the student centre there to have been a *'great help'* with financial advice.

Evie had not used the provision at her university but was very aware of what it provided:

> *"I know there's the [names the student support centre] and all that type of stuff. You can just drop in there and they help you out. I've not had to use it personally but I know it's there if I ever need it. People have had accommodation problems, I know they do money help, stress help. It's always made so aware.... - you always get emails advertising everything." SHEP school1st yr Uni 2*

Mentoring schemes

As noted earlier when discussing informal support from other students, none of the interviewees had participated in a ***formal student peer mentoring*** scheme[9]. More than half were not aware or very vague as to whether it was possible for them to do so. Several did say that it had been mentioned at induction but that this was too soon, as Gill pointed out:

> *'in the first week students are still not too sure of things and don't know how they're going to find the course' . HN 2nd yr Uni 3*

Alan, another interviewee who knew about peer mentoring was emphatic in his view that he would have *'hated'* taking part in peer mentoring, put off by

> *'the idea of being paired with someone you may not like'. HN 2nd yr Uni 2*

Arif also knew about the peer mentoring at his university but felt he did not have time for it since he had a long commute to and from university. At the same university, Will and Jonathan had not taken part in peer mentoring influenced by the negative experience of friends who had done so. Will remarked that his friend's peer mentor *'hadn't been able to answer his questions'* while Jonathan explained:

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[9] In interview we used the terminology relevant to the University concerned.

> *"I could have done it, one of my friends did…he said it wasn't much good…not much help…some of the students [mentors] didn't turn up on time and cancelled meetings'"* standard quals 1st yr Uni 1

While the comments of Will and Jonathan cannot be taken as evidence of how well the peer mentoring scheme was working since they had not actually taken part, it does illustrate that students' decisions to use student support services can be influenced by the experience and opinion of their peers.

Two of the interviewees had taken part in an ***employer/industry mentoring*** scheme and they were both positive about it. Sophie had asked for advice about CV writing and had found it '*really good*'. She heard about it via email and at a presentation at the beginning of a lecture but felt that the presentation '*didn't do it justice*' and it appeared '*too industry focused*'. For Daniel although he knew that the industry mentor can help with such aspects as interviews and networking, the important benefit to him was that it:

> *"helped me focus on my studies because I can see where I want to get to".* HN yr 3 Uni 2

Funding for support provision

In discussing support provision, a number of students commented on the level of resourcing. We have already noted students' suggestions for more places to be available on pre-entry programmes. Talking about support available to students when on course, Matt called for more funding saying that:

> '*the uni support staff are really overstretched…. [they're] low in number and spread out*' HN SWAP 1st yr Uni 3

Jenny talked about the experience and expertise of staff in the student support office and how they had helped her but said '*there's too few of them*'. She suggested that the university should employ more staff in this type of role. Rosie had been directly affected by the level of resourcing, she had previously used the counseling service and found it very good but more recently when she tried to sign up again was faced with a long waiting list; this has discouraged her from even trying to use the counseling service.

Why did students not approach staff or use support services?

We explored with the interviewees the reasons they had or had not approached their lecturers and tutors for advice or used any of their university's support provision; we also discussed their thoughts on their fellow students' attitudes to accessing support.

We have already covered some aspects of this in relation to **personal tutors:**some interviewees simply did not know they had a personal tutor; others were unsure of their role and it was commonly thought they should only be contacted when experiencing major problems. Not being familiar with their personal tutor and feeling that s/he did not know them and their work made them less likely to approach her/him.

Most interviewees did not know about **peer mentoring** schemes. A few students remembered that they had been mentioned at induction but thought this too soon since at that stage students could not judge what might be useful to them later in their course. For two interviewees at one of the Universities, the negative experience of peer mentoring of their friends had discouraged them from taking part. **Employer mentoring** did not seem to be well known at two of the Universities; it had a higher profile at the other University.

Some interviewees said that they had simply not needed any help, as Jonathan put it: *'first you'd have to experience the need'*. We would add, however, that in a few of these interviews our perception was that the student concerned probably would have benefitted from some additional support.

A couple of interviewees had not made use of the support services for **practical reasons**, Nicola had wanted to attend academic skills sessions but these were held at lunchtime which clashed with her course timetable. For Sophie and Ellie, most provision was available at a different campus from the one at which they were based which was a disincentive for them.

For others, concern about **how they would be perceived by staff** if they asked for support had inhibited them from doing so. Graham recounted that he had 'plenty of offers' of help but was nervous about the reaction if he '*admitted to'* not understanding something :

> *"it makes you feel a bit nervous about going to ask them, even though it would probably be beneficial to just go and do it."* HN 3rd yr Uni 1

Although Evie found her lecturers and tutors friendly she was worried that they would think her stupid:

"all the lecturers are lovely and really friendly... I always ask my friends at uni 'can you read this [email] and make sure it makes sense?' They're like 'its fine, just send it' but I'm like 'what if they think I'm stupid?'". SHEP school 1st yr Uni 2

For several students, the reason they had not approached staff or used the support services was because they **wanted to be independent** and deal with any difficulties themselves. Ellie, for example, had not wanted to ask for help:

"I had to get over wanting to be independent…I wanted to try and do it myself because I went through high school without any help, it was kind of like a pride thing, but I was really struggling. So I went to see them [disability services]and they were a big help" SHEP school 1st yr Uni 2

Gill who thought she had been well supported, nevertheless made the point that some people are less able to ask for help:

"If you tell [them] you have a problem, they are on it. I could not ask for more… If you're not the type to ask you'll struggle on." HN 2nd yr Uni 3

Claire was an example of this. A direct entrant to second year at university 1 she had found her first semester '*really difficult*' and struggled with many aspects of academic study such as notetaking at lectures, referencing, essay writing, formal exams and having to study more independently. But she did not seek help since she thought **'no-one can study for me'.** Claire was one of the students who had not met with her PT. By the time of her interview; she had realized that while it is up to her to study, she would have benefitted from some advice, as she said *'maybe some tips would have been useful'* and made her first semester less difficult and stressful.

It was common for the mature students interviewed to comment on the different **attitude of some of the younger students,** that they were less willing to contribute in class and did not want to appear interested in their studies because this '*wasn't cool'* and '*for nerds'*. This perception, they thought, also came into play in some students' willingness to engage with student services. For example, Ed, one of the mature students, said that his university provided a *'lot of support and that staff make time'* for students but thought that some were unwilling to engage because of this attitude. He pointed to the resources on the VLE as an example of this:

"we've got this big thing [VLE] that tells you everything you have got to read and when you have got to read it by but 'that's for nerds'. The University can't do anything about that, there's always gone to be people like that." HN 2nd yr Uni 3

He suggested that it might help if the VLE was promoted more by the student facilitators in the induction:

"They could say 'make use of it'. It might not be cool or fashionable but we're not at uni to be cool and fashionable, we're here to get a degree." HN 2nd yr Uni 3

Some other interviewees either **did not know or had forgotten** what they had been told **at induction** about student services. As we have noted, Gill thought that introducing peer mentoring at induction was too soon and helped explain the low take- up. Sophie made a similar point about student services in general: apart from the difficulty of assimilating a great deal of information at induction, critically, at this stage students are not a position to judge which, if any, of the services might be relevant to them later. Talking about her induction week, Sophie remarked that there had been so much information to take in that *'you kind of forget it all'* and that:

"I think you just forget what is there, at the time I thought I wouldn't need it but you forget it is there."

Rosie suggested that it would help remind students about the available support if it was mentioned more throughout the year, for example, in lectures.

Ellie said she did not really know *'most of what's available'* in terms of student support and that while there is **information and resources on the VLE** it *'can be hard to find things there'* and needs to *'be more noticeable'.* Martin, a student at the same university echoed this. He too reported that he did not know about much about student support provision and that the university could do more to improve student's awareness:

"just make students aware of the services available. It's on [VLE] but it's hidden. There is dyslexic parts on the website [but] you have to go quite far into the website to get it, so I think just make those kinds of things more noticeable."

Sarah had recognized that she needed help with academic writing but had not known how to get in touch with the relevant service. She suggested that it was important to include **more detailed information** about how exactly to get in touch with the relevant services:

> *"I think maybe if they prepare a little package for direct entrants which explains everything that is available and how to get in contact with these people, because once I knew that it was available I still didn't know how to get contact with them."*

It is worth noting that Sarah was a direct entrant to third year and her comments reflect the particular difficulties facing third year entrants who have to get to grips with a new environment and way of learning in what is a very pressurised year for all students. Third year direct entrants are among the students most likely to need assistance but they are also the ones with the least time to find out about it, this may help explain Sarah's suggestion for more detailed information.

A point raised by interviewees at all three Universities was that although they might know in general that there are various types of support available from posters, pamphlets and mentions on the university website etc, nevertheless**, they still may not know exactly what they can help with,** the detail of what the service can offer. This was something that they struggled to articulate but Nathan at university 2 gave the example of a friend who knew that the university had a disability service but did not realise that it could provide assistance with his dyslexia. Jenny suggested it might be better if students knew exactly what the different support staff are there for:

> *'It would be good to have a list with specifics - that if the issue is about ABC then you see a certain person…if about XYZ you see a different person" HN 2nd yr Uni 1*

In terms of students accessing support provision, the interviews highlight an issue about students' awareness of the available services and exactly what they offer. They suggest a need to review the timing of information giving and its frequency; to provide greater detail about the help available, who exactly to contact and how to do so; and ensure that the information and resources on university VLE systems are readily accessible, bearing in mind that students may be trying to access them while under stress.

The interviews raise the two other fundamental issues: to what extent are students able to **recognize when they have a need** for additional support and how **willing are they to ask** for assistance.

The first year of degree study is a challenging experience for most students so it can be difficult for someone to assess whether what they are experiencing is beyond the 'normal' level of challenge and the time to seek advice. It is perhaps not surprising that having gone through a competitive process to prove that they are capable of degree level study and

achieve a place on their degree programme, students may be unwilling or embarrassed to ask for support and think that by doing so they will be judged as 'failures' or 'stupid' by staff. (Or indeed, seen as 'uncool' by fellow students.)

This was something that Jenny had thought about, drawing on knowledge and experience from her voluntary work. She had come to the conclusion that universities '*need to market the help differently*':

> "*The idea would be truly trying to get across that it's OK to feel like that, it's OK to have these negative emotions or feel like they are struggling.....They worry that people will judge them and see them as a failure if they ask for help, that is their main fear: 'if I say I am struggling then I am a failure*". HN yr 2 Uni 1

This relates to the concept of emotional health and well being and how students understand and deal with negative experiences.

Helping students to recognise when they need support and encouraging them to access it is where the ***personal tutor has, in theory, a vital role to play***. If the system is operating as it is meant to do, personal tutors should be meeting regularly with students, not just if they come with problems but on a more routine basis to discuss their progress generally with them. Personal tutors are in the position to help students reflect on their progress, identify if and when they would benefit from additional support and encourage them to access it. The personal tutor system is the one aspect of student support system that is not reactive in that, in theory at least, all students are offered the opportunity of regular meetings. This contrasts with other support provision whereby it is up to the student to come forward and seek assistance. However, evidence from both elements of this study indicates that the personal tutor system is not working well in practice. We discuss the implications for the personal tutor system further in the next chapter.

Summary

Personal tutor system
1. Around half of the interviewees did not know or were unsure whether they had a personal tutor.

2. Some did not contact their personal tutor because they preferred to talk to lecturers they were familiar with or were in contact with other support services.

3. A common perception was that there was no need to meet or contact their personal tutor unless they were having major problems.

4. Most interviewees were uncertain of the personal tutor's role and the purpose of regular meetings.

5. Having some familiarity with the person who was their personal tutor meant interviewees were more likely to contact or meet him/her.

6. A system whereby a personal tutor is also the academic tutor for their students was viewed positively.

7. Interviewees were divided as to whether meetings with personal tutors - at least initially - should be compulsory.

8. Most (but not all) of the interviewees who had met their personal tutor had found this helpful.

9. Interviewees who were aware of their personal tutor were supportive of the approach of having a member of staff with the remit to support students.

Academic skills/ learning support service

10. Most interviewees had some awareness of the workshops and classes run by their university's academic skills/ learning support service.

11. Workshops etc were generally seen as helpful by those who had taken part. The interviewees who had had received one-to-one assistance were extremely positive about its impact on their work and grades.

12. Other interviewees thought they had no need of additional academic support or had found the scheduling of workshops and courses inconvenient.

13. It was suggested that some of the materials used in workshops should be integrated into lectures at relevant points throughout the course.

Disability services

14. Nearly a third of interviewees had received support in relation to a disability; they were all positive about this assistance and the difference it had made.

15. The Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) from SAAS was critical to the assistance a number of the interviewees received. Several thought the university could have provided more help with applying for it.

Student support centre

16. The student support centre in each university that provides information and advice on a range of topics was reasonably well known and regarded by interviewees.

Mentoring schemes

17. None of the interviewees had taken part in a peer mentoring scheme and awareness was low.

18. Two interviewees had participated in employer/industry mentoring and had both found it helpful.

Funding

19. There were comments from interviewees about support staff being over-stretched; they suggested increased funding.

Why students do not use support services or approach staff

20. Some interviewees had not made use of provision because they were not experiencing difficulties and so did not think they needed assistance.

21. Not knowing they had a personal tutor, lack of awareness of their role and when to contact them and feeling that they were not known to their personal tutor all contributed to lack of contact with personal tutors.

22. Take-up of peer mentoring was mainly related to lack of awareness. Knowledge of employer mentoring was limited in two of the Universities.

23. Practical reasons such as the timing or location of the support provision prevented or discouraged use of provision.

24. Concern about how staff would perceive them if they asked for support inhibited some from doing so.

25. The desire to be independent and deal with difficulties themselves was a reason some interviewees did not want to use support provision.

26. Mature students thought that some younger students did not engage with support service because of a fashion of not wanting to appear too interested in their studies.

27. Commonly, interviewees had forgotten the information provided about support services at induction; this was also too soon for them to assess what might be relevant to them later on their course.

28. Some interviewees did not know the range of services available and found it difficult to find out more and to access relevant resources on the University's VLE.

29. Although students might know in general that support is available, they might not know exactly what the services can help with and who to contact.

30. The interviews highlight three key issues: students' awareness of available services;

31. their ability to recognise when they need support; and their willingness to seek this support.

32. It was suggested that universities need to market support provision differently, taking account of students' concerns of being perceived negatively if they ask for support.

33. Personal tutors have a vital role to play in helping students recognise and access support but the personal tutor system in practice is not operating effectively.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and recommendations

This study has considered students' experience of their first year of degree study and their awareness, use and perceptions of the variety of support available to them. Its prime focus has been on widening participation (WP) groups and examining differences between WP groups but it has also taken account of the experience of those from non WP backgrounds in their first year of study.

A wider view of support

The research set out primarily to examine the formal support provision available to students such as the personal tutor system, academic learning support, disability services and so on but a key conclusion of the study is the need for a wider view that takes account of how students conceptualise support and who provides it. It was very clear from both the survey and interview elements of the research that when students think about support, it is their lecturers and tutors who in the first instance they perceive as the providers of support rather than their personal tutors or other designated support services; these were perceived of as a second level of support. In terms of how universities can create a supportive environment, therefore, one of the conclusions of this study is that the role of academic teaching staff in providing this first level of support is critical and needs to be developed alongside the formal support mechanisms.

A second aspect of a wider view of support is the need to take account of the crucial role of students' informal support network, that is, their fellow students. Support from other students was critical to their academic progress as well as to their social life and in helping them cope with personal issues. In many cases this informal support was from others in the same year but students also found it helpful to have friends in the upper years of their course. Universities have been developing formal peer mentoring schemes, the survey found that around a fifth of students had taken part in peer mentoring while the interviews indicated some lack of awareness of the schemes. Undoubtedly, such peer mentoring schemes have a part to play but universities should also consider how best to support students in developing their own informal networks. The extent to which students are able to make friends and integrate into their course and university is clearly vital to doing so but, as we have highlighted, integration can be a problem for mature students as well as direct entrants going into second or third year when existing students have already developed

their networks. There is a role for universities to facilitate students' integration and some of the students in the study made suggestions about how staff can do this.

Variation in support – a minimum entitlement?

Another general issue raised by the study is the extent of variation in students' experience of support within and across the Universities. It was also apparent that certain aspects of support depended on the initiative of individual members of staff rather than being standard practice across a department or School. Such variation, we suggest, raises questions about what is an appropriate and acceptable level of variation and whether universities should consider setting out a minimum support entitlement for students. This would need to allow sufficient flexibility to meet different circumstances and needs, including the time constraints on some students' ability to engage with provision. It would also be important that any minimum support entitlement recognised and respected students' decisions not to engage.

The experience of widening participation students

The experience of widening participation students and how they are supported in their transition was the central question for the research. The study shows that this varies markedly across the different WP groups but that there were also considerable similarities in experience of WP groups and standard entry students.

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds (SIMD 20/40) did find certain aspects of degree study more difficult than others from more affluent areas but they were no more likely to report difficulties with integration into university life. In respect of support provision, there were no apparent differences in the awareness, experience and opinion of students from SIMD 20/40 postcodes and that of students from other areas. We do not have survey data on students who had attended a SHEP school but they were included in the interview element of the research. In interview these students gave a very similar account of their first year of degree study to that of their fellow students from non- SHEP schools. They seemed as well integrated into university life and there was no difference in their experience of support provision.

It was very clear, however, that the HN qualified students and especially those who were direct entrants to second or third year of degree study encountered the greatest challenges. They were also the group who in some respects were least well served by the personal tutor

system, the key element of student support. Although most students had some difficulty with various aspect of academic learning, these were more of a problem for those with HN qualifications who were direct entrants.

Part of the reason is the different content, pedagogy and assessment of HN courses and extent of curricular match but it is also because they simply faced greater challenges. Rather than start in first year - designed as something of a transitional or introductory year - these students had gone straight into the second or third year of a degree programme. This meant that they faced a greater demand in terms of course content and, by this stage, it was generally expected that students were familiar with the university environment and had been able in earlier year(s) to develop the necessary skills and understanding for successful study. Direct entrants also had to try to integrate into an already well-established year group and most found social integration difficult. These challenges were particularly acute for direct entrants to third year given the standard of work expected at this stage and the contribution of third year exam results towards their final degree. Yet, in this pressurised year, they were the students with the least time and space to think about accessing support provision.

Mature students were not identified in the research brief as a specific group of interest. Nevertheless, it was apparent that they encountered particular challenges compared with younger students, especially in respect of integration (whether or not they were direct entrants). Although having a long commute to/from university also made a different to students' ability to integrate, it was interesting to see that it did not appear to have such a negative effect on younger students' integration compared with that of mature students. Other differences were apparent in mature students' experience of support provision.

Supporting students during their HN course

HN qualified students are expected to articulate into the second or third year of a degree, often through specific articulation arrangements between colleges and universities. Colleges and universities have put considerable effort into developing partnership working and provision that aims to equip students with the necessary learning and skills to make a successful transition. Nevertheless, this study has shown that HN students were more likely than non HN entrants to encounter difficulties with a number of aspects of their degree course and wanted more support at the HN stage to minimize future difficulties in their degree studies. We recognise that HN provision has a dual purpose of providing

qualifications that fit students for entry to the labour market as well as for possible entry to degree study but more needs to be done if those HN students who do go on to degree study are to make a successful transition. This is perfectly possible – although as a group HN entrants were more likely to experience problems than their non HN peers, not all of them did so and some described ways in which they had been prepared for university. A related study involving the three Universities and their partner colleges has considered the issue in detail and made a number of recommendations (see Howieson 2016). We do not repeat these here but would highlight a couple of points.

One is the need for colleges and universities to review the extent of academic skill development in HND and especially HNC courses. Although it was the exception, the experience of several of the HN students interviewed shows that it is possible to introduce more independent learning and help students develop the necessary academic learning skills. We have emphasized the HNC stage because it appears that colleges frequently presume that students will continue from their HNC to the HND and that any preparation can be left until then.

A second point is the need for improved curricular mapping of HN and degrees to improve alignment, at least in the areas where articulation is common.

Pre-entry support- earlier and more specific support wanted

Overall most students were positive about their contacts with the Universities at the pre-entry stage through, for example, Open Days and Applicant Days. Students who had taken part in pre-entry preparatory programmes including summer schools were especially positive in their opinion. Nevertheless, most students thought that provision could be further developed and made a number of suggestions that we detailed in the Chapter 3.

Many of the students' suggestions centred on the desire for earlier and more specific preparatory support from their University so that they would arrive better prepared to try an avoid future difficulties ; this was something wanted by standard entry students as well as by direct entrants. They wanted more detailed information about the curricular content of their degree and advice about relevant academic learning skills. In calling for this, they were, in effect, expressing a desire for a closer and more personal relationship with their university from the point at which they were offered or, at least, accepted a place. It also related to a general preference for information specific to their course rather than being more general. Suggestions include:

- Give students access to detailed course and module information once they have been accepted

- Allow students access to examples of previous students' work

- Set up social media for specific courses eg Facebook pages as well as having more general university and admissions pages

- Increase funding/make more places available on pre-entry programmes.

Addressing knowledge and skills gaps at the pre-entry stage

We have noted that a particular difficulty for direct entrants was gaps in their knowledge and skills when they started in second or third year. As we pointed out in the preceding section, students were positive about the pre-entry provision they had experienced reflecting the major efforts by universities and colleges to develop a range of provision to help prepare students. In interviews, direct entrants suggested that universities could further develop provision to pre-empt the issue of the knowledge gaps problem by supporting them to address this before they start university. Possible approaches include:

- Give direct entrants access to previous year(s)' materials once they have accepted a place, highlighting the essential elements and including examples of previous students' work

- curricular mapping of HNs and degree courses to identify gaps and develop top-up materials that direct entrants could use over the summer

- online skills audits or similar with individuals to identify gaps in his/her knowledge or skills base to identify specific areas of need.

Developing induction support

Most students had found their induction useful but also had a number of suggestions about how provision could be enhanced. These frequently related to making induction activities more specific to their particular degree course and maximising opportunities for integration also to their year of entry. They wanted both course specific information and advice and also the opportunity to get to know others taking the same degree and starting in the same year. Other suggestions concerned the organisation of particular activities. Possible approaches include:

- Induction activities organised to promote integration eg bringing together students on the same course rather than simply being School-based and also students starting in the same year

- Provide more course specific information and advice with examples of work from previous years

- Take more account of mature students in planning induction so that content is not overly focused on young entrants.

- Review the appropriateness of induction activities to ensure they are helpful to students and avoid adding to their stress

- While student helpers/facilitators are valuable members of the induction team, they need to be well selected and briefed.

Early and continuing support from academic staff wanted

We pointed out at the beginning of this chapter that students perceived their lecturers and tutors as their first level of support. This is likely to have implications for the training and support of teaching staff and possibly for staff numbers.

As a starting point, it would be helpful if academic staff were aware of the profile of students on their courses including the number of direct entrants and had some idea about their previous learning experience. This might help alleviate the problem of 'assumed knowledge' on the part of staff that was the common experience of direct entrants.

While induction was regarded as helpful, many students wanted more support in the early weeks of the first semester from academic teaching staff as part of their classes rather than as separate provision. This early support was seen as especially important by direct entrants to help them 'get them up to speed' on their degree and begin to integrate with existing students. It may be useful to consider how the formal support services such as the academic skills learning support can work with the teaching staff to help them develop and deliver more integrated provision, for example, to include elements of academic skills support into courses at relevant points.

A frequent suggestion from direct entrants was that in the first week(s) of the academic year, teaching staff should run 'catch-up' sessions which would go over some of the key content covered in the previous year. These could also act as useful revision sessions for existing students and could also offer a natural opportunity for new and existing students to get to know each other. Several students in the study mentioned having this type of session

and how helpful they had been. They had, however, been provided at the initiative of individual members of staff and were not standard practice. We have already suggested the development of catch-up materials for direct entrants to use at the pre-entry stage and revision sessions could also make use of these materials.

As students in their first year of degree study, all of those involved in the study faced the challenge of making the transition to academic study. They suggested various ways in which teaching staff could support them in their learning, for example, by being more explicit about expectations, providing clarity about standards and showing examples of students' work. Comprehensive and timely feedback on assignments etc was seen as vital to help them improve their work. At a very practical level, direct entrants put forward the idea that each course should have a guide on *its own particular* requirements for the formatting and style (including referencing) of documents. To summarise:

- Academic teaching staff should be informed about the number of HN students and direct entrants on their course(s) and about their previous learning experience

- Revision sessions for direct entrants should be run at the beginning of the academic year as standard practice

- Teaching staff should give attention to making expectations and standards of work explicit (with exemplification) and ensure feedback is sufficient to enable students to improve.

- Teaching staff and the University's academic learning support service could work together to help integrate academic skills support into courses at appropriate points.

Supporting students' integration

We have already discussed the importance of students being well integrated into their course and university and being able to establish their own informal support network. Ways in which universities might facilitate this include:

- Induction to include the students they will be on their course with (same year of entry and specific course)
- Provide opportunities in the first weeks of classes for direct entrants to meet and get to know existing students
- Teaching approaches to encourage integration eg more group work especially in the first semester and assign students to groups to encourage mixing

- Assigning students to tutorials etc to create mixed groups rather than on an alphabetical basis or self-enrolment
- Set up and encourage students to create Facebook pages etc for their course and groups
- provide opportunities to get to know students in the year(s) above on their course
- review peer mentoring schemes to ensure they meet the needs and expectations of both mentors and mentees.

Improving the personal tutor system

The personal tutor system has been a central element of student support at universities for a number of years but the evidence from both elements of this study indicates that it is not working well in practice. In relation to the support of WP students, it was apparent that as a group, HN direct entrants were least well served by the personal tutor system: the survey found that less than half of them had met with their personal tutor and almost a fifth did not know that they had one. The survey also showed that both HN and non HN students' experience of the personal tutor system varied significantly across the Universities.

The interviews told a similar story. Around half of the students interviewed did not know or were unsure whether they had a personal tutor. Most of those who did know they had a personal tutor were nevertheless unclear about their role or the purpose of regular meetings or thought that they should only see their personal tutor if they had major difficulties. Feeling that their personal tutor did not know them discouraged some from approaching her/him.

There are problems, therefore, in terms of students' awareness of the personal tutor system, understanding of their role and willingness to approach them. Can universities address this? We have noted in the section on pre-entry that students wanted earlier and more in-depth contact with their University once they had accepted a place. Would it be feasible to assign them their personal tutor at this stage to be their main point of contact with the University? In this way they would know that the person existed and could begin to develop some familiarity and connection with her/him.

It was apparent in the study that where the personal tutor system was organised so that students had some sort of regular contact with the person who was their personal tutor, they were more prepared to consult her/him. In these cases, the students' personal tutor was also their academic tutor with whom they had weekly meetings so that the students

felt that this was someone who knew them and their work. Could this approach be used more widely in the Universities?

The expectation in the three Universities in the study is that all academics should be personal tutors and that training for the role is not mandatory although it is encouraged and resources available, including online. We suggest that the Universities may wish to review this[10], as we discuss further in the next section, the personal tutor is potentially the lynch-pin of student support and so needs to be committed to the role and have the capacity to carry it out. They also need sufficient time. If currently personal tutors do not meet with a substantial proportion of their tutees, it is difficult to see how they would have time to meet with them all. In any review of personal tutors, an important aspect is how the role is regarded and rewarded in the Universities, for example, is it something that is taken into account in the criteria for promotion?

- When should students be assigned their personal tutor? Could this be done as soon as they have accepted a place?

- Universities should consider how the personal tutor system can be organised so that students can develop some familiarity and connection with the person who is their personal tutor

- Induction programmes need to ensure that direct entrants as well as students starting in first years are made aware of and meet their personal tutor

- Should an initial meeting with their personal tutor be compulsory for students?

- Universities might consider whether all academic staff should be personal tutors or if it should be undertaken on a voluntary basis

- Mandatory training for personal tutors to include issues of student diversity, including WP, and implications for their work should be considered.

Positive opinions but barriers to accessing support

Firstly it is important to acknowledge the very positive opinions of students who had used support provision such as disability services and academic learning support; they clearly valued the assistance they had received and felt it had made a difference to their progress. Many other students had not made use of provision and while some did not need to, the

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[10] At the time of writing, the PT system is under review at two of the Universities.

study shows that there were barriers that prevented others accessing potentially useful support. These barriers can be summarized as:

1. students' awareness of available services, in particular, knowing specifically what they can help with;
2. their ability to recognise if and when they need support;
3. their willingness to seek support.

In relation to the first barrier, students' awareness, the study suggests a need to:

- review the timing of information giving and its frequency; reminders after induction, especially in lectures and by teaching staff may be useful

- provide more detail about the support available so students know specifically what each service can provide and how to access it;

- ensure that the information and resources on university VLE systems and websites are readily accessible, bearing in mind that students may be trying to access them while under stress.

The other two issues are more fundamental: students' ability to recognize when they have a need for additional support and their willingness to ask for it. In some respects this is not surprising. Students have gone through a competitive application process to secure their place at university and show they are capable of degree study. This may well have been a particular challenge for some of the WP students. It is therefore understandable that some are nervous or embarrassed to ask for help and fear they will be judged as 'failures' or 'stupid'. It was suggested that Universities need to market or present support provision differently to students to take account of how they interpret asking for help. This relates to the concept of 'emotional health and well being' and how students understand and deal with negative experiences.

This is where personal tutors could play a vital role. If the system is operating as it is meant to, personal tutors should be meeting regularly with students, not specifically if they have problems. Personal tutors therefore have the opportunity to help students reflect on their progress, identify if and when they would benefit from additional support and encourage them to access it. The personal tutor system is the one aspect of student support that, in principle, is both comprehensive and proactive in that all students are offered the opportunity of regular meetings. This contrasts with other support provision which is reactive and depends on the student to come forward and seek assistance. We suggest that:

To address the issues of students' ability to identify any need for additional support and their willingness to access provision, we suggest that:

- the personal tutor system has the potential to play the key role in helping students recognise when they need support and in encouraging them to use of available services. Realising this potential, however, requires changes to the personal tutor system as discussed in the previous section.

- the marketing of support services needs to take account of students' attitudes to seeking help and especially their fears of being labeled as stupid or a failure.

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Appendix 1 Interview guide

NB Interviews were semi-structured; this guide indicates the areas covered but the wording and sequencing of questions varied as appropriate in each interview.

Introduction

The project is interested in the experience of students in their transition to university study over the first year as undergraduates and support available to them. It involves 3 universities: Heriot-Watt, ENU and QMU.

It investigates what issues/challenges students face during their first year of study, what support is available to then, whether they think it is useful/helpful, it helps them and what more could their university do or do differently. It is interested in the experience of both standard entry and WP students. The aim is to improve things! The project is funded by the SFC who will use the information to spread examples of good practice in student support around Scotland.

The data from the project will be anonymised, so please feel to speak your mind. No names will be used in our report and your responses will not be shared directly with anyone at your university.

Check

Can you tell me a bit about yourself, what you're studying, what year you're in and how you came to be studying at the university?

- Check WP or non-WP status

    - entry qualification including SWAP;

    - if HN are they Associate student or not (most will not be AS)

    - if Higher/AH – what school did you go to? Involved in LEAPS etc at school?

For HN and associate students only –contact with university while at college. To what extent did your time at college prepare you for uni?

1. Did you have university staff coming into college to deliver/participate in elements of the HN eg lectures, project work etc?

2. Did you visit the university at all? If so, what for? E.g. just open days or more than this? eg attend tutorials, lectures, labs etc;

3. Did you make use of any university facilities? Library, sports facilities, union, halls etc

4. Did you have any contact with university students while at college? E.g talks by current students or student mentor; informal contacts via friends, flatmates?

5. While at college, did you have any discussion or receive advice from anyone about differences between college and university, between HN study and degree study?

6. In retrospect what has been the most useful information, advice or experiences at college in preparing for degree study/ transition to university?

7. what else the college could have done to prepare you for university?

8. what else could the university have done to prepare you for university when you were at college?

Pre-entry -ALL
9. before you started university, did you have any pre-entry/preparation for university activities? If yes, what? how useful was it? Could they be improved?
10. If no pre-entry provision, would some have been useful? What would have helped?

Induction -ALL
11. What induction to university and/or to 1st/2nd/3rd year did you receive? (general university wide induction and school/course specific)

12. Were you aware of or take part in any induction support specifically for LEAPs? Or for those on HN/ Associated Students or direct entrants?

13. Have any of these induction activities been useful to you? What was most useful and how?

14. What do you think about the timing and duration of induction? What's the best balance between activities etc at the beginning and on-going during 1st semester or into 2nd semester?

15. Can you think of any ways to improve induction?

Challenges- ALL
16. How have you found your first year at university? What have been the main challenges/ aspects you've found particularly difficult? Eg

- teaching methods; contributing in tutorials; independent study;

- level of work;

- clarity of expectations; assumed knowledge;

- assessment; getting feedback – is it helpful, could it be improved?

- relationships with staff (lecturers and tutors) – if approached them at end/outside of class? Why/why not?

- university ICT systems (eg electronic submissions);

- time management;

- part work;

- finance;

- making friends/integration; feeling 'a real student'/part of the university. Did you know anyone at the University when you started here?

If you started in 2nd or 3rd year:

17. do you think this was the right year to start at?

18. Looking back now, how well prepared were you?

19. do you think there's any difference between yourself and other students in terms of how well you are able to cope with university/degree study?

    Eg those coming from school vs college; having Highers/AH/A levels vs HN; if family/friends been to university

20. Have you ever thought about leaving – why/ why not? If so, what made you stay?

Engagement with support provision

21. Do you know who your personal tutor (QMU) / personal development tutor (ENU)/ academic mentor (HWU)?

22. Have you met with your personal tutor (QMU) / personal development tutor (ENU)/ academic mentor (HWU)? Was this as an individual or as part of a group? How often have you met? how useful was this?

23. what do you think the PT meetings are about/should be about?

24. If you didn't meet with your PT or missed meetings– why?

25. What could be done to make you want to meet your PT and for it to be more useful?

26. How much your personal tutor know about your background– how much would you want them to know or be told?

27. Are you aware of, or have you attended, any forms of academic support? E.g. academic advisors, workshops, courses, online support? How did you find this?

28. Have you used any of the support services (see q'aire list). If not, why?

29. Have you been involved at all with peer mentoring/peer assisted learning [explain if necessary]?

30. What would encourage you to engage more with the different support provision? What more or different could the university do to help?

Informal support networks - ALL

31. When you're preparing for or writing an essay/report etc, do you tend to do it alone or work with other students? Does this help?

32. Who do you talk to about their university work? (parents, siblings, flatmates etc ?)

33. To what extent does where you live impact on your university work?

What more should university do - ALL

34. What else could the university do, or what could they do differently to support students like you?

35. What's the best approach – should there be separate activities/events for certain groups of students **or** just access mainstream support or mixture?

36. What message would you me to pass on to the university about supporting students?

37. **HN and AS only** Views on taking the AS /HS route to degree – was it the right route for them; pros and cons