

# Report on an Evaluation of the On Track Project

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This report is on an evaluation of the On Track Project designed to support students making the transition from Higher National Qualification (HNQ) study at Further Education Colleges (FECs) to degree level study at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The HNQ route is understood to make an important contribution to widening access to HEIs but it is recognised that students from FECs face particular problems in dealing with the differences between the two types of institution and the demands they make on the student.

The On Track Project aims to: encourage students to consider progressing from HNQs to degree level study; build confidence; address the 'skills gap'; offer advice and information. A programme has been designed to do so by addressing issues of differences in teaching and learning modes between FECs and HEIs, and issues of assessment methods, learner responsibility, culture and support systems. The programme being evaluated was delivered by trained postgraduate and undergraduate tutor/mentors in 12 FECs during the spring or summer term of the 2002/3 session.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Performance indicators were devised to measure how successfully On Track had achieved its aims. Data were collected using questionnaires (distributed to On Track participants who completed the programme in 2003 then progressed to HEIs, and a Control Group) and in-depth interviews with a sample of the On Track students who returned questionnaires. There were major problems in contacting On Track students to distribute questionnaires and in establishing a Control Group which matched the On Track sample. The evaluation is based on 40 questionnaires returned by the On Track sample and 26 returned by the Control Group, and 11 in-depth interviews.

## 3. FINDINGS

### 3.2. Progression of On Track students to HEIs

96 of the 129 students who completed the On Track programme progressed to HEIs, with 44 progressing to Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU), 40 to the University

of Paisley (PU) and the rest to 7 other HEIs. Students entered at levels one, two and three, with over half entering at level three. Students who took part in On Track were self-selecting as likely to progress to HEIs so the data cannot be used to measure On Track's effectiveness in encouraging students to progress to HEIs. It is suggested that in order to achieve this aim the Project would need to devote time to sessions with all HNQ students, aimed at raising awareness of progression and its benefits.

Tracking students was a time-consuming exercise and it was not possible to collect accurate data on all On Track participants due in part to deficiencies in the records held by On Track.

### 3.3. Student Retention

6% of the On Track sample had withdrawn by the time the questionnaires were received, at the beginning of the second semester or term. However this result could not be compared with withdrawal rates of all students entering the HEIs from FECs as the HEIs were unable to provide the relevant data. Appropriate procedures should be planned and put in place in order to measure the possible effect of On Track on student retention/withdrawal for future cohorts.

### 3.4. Overall success of the On Track Project

In the questionnaires 80% of On Track students reported that the project was quite or very successful at preparing them for life at an HEI. It was acknowledged that there was a limit to how far such a project could prepare FEC students for major challenges of the HEI environment, such as independent learning and critical thinking, other than to make students aware of these challenges and their implications and providing reassuring role-models. In the questionnaires and interviews On Track students tended to be very positive about the value of On Track in achieving this.

Students were asked to choose from a list of adjectives to describe how they felt when they began their degree programmes. Results for the On Track sample and the Control Group were similar in most respects except that a significantly larger proportion of the On Track sample checked "Well prepared" while a significantly smaller one checked "An outsider" or "Terrified". These scores suggest that On Track might be having a positive effect on students' sense of preparedness and

belonging, and in reducing anxiety. In the interviews, students attributed the alleviation of fear to the approachability and reassurance of On Track tutors.

### 3.5. Coping with degree level study

There were no significant differences between the On Track sample and the Control Group in response to a question asking how well they were coping with degree level study, with 85% responding that they were coping quite well or very well. It was not possible to use passes in examinations as a Performance Indicator in this study as many students had not yet received their results. More had received marks for essays but the data were not sufficiently reliable for a proper meaningful comparison between the On Track Sample and the Control Group.

It was clear from the questionnaires and the interviews that exam revision, exam techniques, the use of academic terminology, deconstructing questions, referencing, essay writing and HEI marking schemes had been of considerable benefit to those students who had covered these topics well in the On Track programme.

### 3.6. Key skills for degree level study

On track students did not rate their confidence at lecture-note taking when they began their courses very highly and, although some students clearly benefited from sessions on this in the programme, others did not. In the interviews some students reported that they had tried to use the same approach to note-taking at their HEI as they had used at their FEC, unaware that this would not be appropriate.

Results for students' confidence in taking notes from reading suggested that On Track students were better prepared for this than the Control Group. However, the questionnaires and interviews suggested that some were anxious about their lack of understanding of referencing.

While some students had clearly been well prepared for using library resources by On Track others reported that this had not been well covered and this could be especially stressful for direct entry students whose fellow students were familiar with these resources and how to use them.

The interviews and the questionnaires suggested a lack of consistency in the teaching of key skills for HEIs, so that some students gave glowing reports of how their tutors had prepared them for degree level study in these respects, while others reported that some topics had been inadequately covered and sometimes not at all.

### 3.7. Knowing who to go to for help

The vast majority of On Track students responded that they know who to go to for help with their studies and with financial problems. In the interviews it was pointed out that students who were used to the very visible and easily accessible support provided in FECs needed to understand that HEIs also provide support but that students may need to seek it out.

### 3.8. How might On Track be improved?

Overall, most On Track students clearly regarded the project as successful in preparing them for life and study at an HEI, by raising their awareness of the challenges they would face and providing tutors who could reassure them and answer their questions. Respondents suggested that the effectiveness of On Track would be increased if groups of students were allocated tutors who followed courses in similar subject areas to them. It was also suggested (and implied by many interview discussions) that tutors who had studied for HNQs would be in the best position to help students cope with the transition from these courses to degree courses.

Data from questionnaires and interviews suggested that the more focussed sessions dealing with particular aspects of HEI study were the most effective, especially when combined with question/answer sessions, while abstract sessions with role-playing and other game-style exercises were considered to be poor use of time. It is important that all key topics are sufficiently well covered by all groups. There is a danger that when sessions are student-led they might fail to cover some topics because students are unaware of their significance in the HEI setting. Most comments on the questionnaires suggesting how On Track might be improved suggested more sessions and more information or time on a topic already included in the programme, and there were a few proposals for additional topics. This was reinforced in the interviews, in which a number of respondents suggested that the programme was too short or too condensed and would benefit from more time.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The On Track Project is clearly having some success in achieving its overall aims, and some very notable successes in particular areas. Most students reported on the benefits of becoming aware of the differences between HNQ and degree level study and of learning key skills to cope with these differences. The tutors/mentors were generally considered to be inspiring and helpful and provided reassuring role-models.

Sessions that focussed on specific skills and topics relating directly to studying at an HEI were considered to be most useful while more abstract sessions were less well thought of. Where students reported that key skills and topics were well covered they tended to report that they were beneficial in preparing students for degree level study but there was much reporting of inadequate coverage and resulting dissatisfaction.

The Project may need to be extended in order to ensure that the programme covers all topics sufficiently without sacrificing time spent on question/answer sessions, and to allow for some additional topics.

#### 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The report makes 15 recommendations, including: continuing those aspects of the of the project that have been demonstrably beneficial and singled out for praise by participating students; the addition of new topics or activities; some adjustments to the programme to increase its effectiveness; additional session(s) to ensure that all topics are properly covered without loosing time for valuable question/answer sessions; putting in place systems and procedures for future evaluations.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Background

This report is on an evaluation of the On Track Project, set up in 2002 and funded by the West of Scotland Wider Access Forum (WSWAF). On Track was designed to support students making the transition from study at Further Education Colleges (FECs) to degree level study at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The evaluation, conducted on behalf of the WSWAF by an independent researcher, took place between 7<sup>th</sup> January and 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2004. The purpose was to evaluate the success of the On Track Project in fulfilling its aims and to identify any areas where improvements might be made. The On Track Project team carried out its own student evaluation in 2003 but this is the first independent evaluation and, most importantly, one based on students' actual experience at an HEI after participating in the On Track Project.

The Higher National Qualification (HNQ) route to degree level study is understood to make an important contribution to widening access to HEIs (Cloonan and Turner 1997, Gallacher et al 1997, Kemmer 2003a & b, Raab et al 1998, Scottish Funding Councils for Further and Higher Education 2002) and in 2002, 2015 students enrolled on full-time degree courses in the WSWAF's HEIs (excluding Bell College) with HNCs or HNDs as their highest entrance qualification<sup>i</sup>. This represents 22% of the student intake in these institutions.

While some research has shown that articulating students might actually be less likely to withdraw than more conventional students (Gallacher et al 1997), there is evidence that institutional interventions might be effective in reducing attrition rates (Morgan et al 2001). While it is understood that many students (especially mature students) who do withdraw do so temporarily and return at a later date to complete their degrees (McGivney 1996), it is nevertheless important to address the so called "revolving

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<sup>i</sup>Calculated from figures presented in Table 10, p27, Scottish Higher Education Council Statistical Bulletin 2/2002.

door” syndrome in which widening access strategies draw students into HEIs but may fail to retain them.

Research has shown that students progressing from HNC/D to degree level study at HEIs face a number of problems in managing the transition between the two very different types of institutions, and the demands they make of the student. Gallacher et al (1997:22) identify the problems experienced by their sample of students progressing from FECs to HEIs as falling into the following categories: assessment procedures; teaching methods, availability of staff, other problems. McLennan et al (2001) highlight the cultural differences between FECs and HEIs and the ‘skills gap’ between students progressing into levels two or three of a degree programme and an HEIs own continuing students as threats to attainment among articulating students and Gallacher (2003:13) suggests that some staff at HEIs feel that students from FECs are not adequately prepared for entry into degree programmes.

The very size and scale of HEIs compared with FECs can make initial orientation a challenge, and the lack of direct, two-way communication between students and teaching staff is in marked contrast to the informality and intimacy of many FEC classes. Information gathering from library resources can be much more complex than in relatively small FEC libraries. Moreover, study at an HEI demands more independent learning and greater responsibility on the part of the student than is required for HN study. All these factors can make the transition daunting, especially for students who come from families and communities in which study at an HEI is a rarity.

The ‘skills gap’ associated with differences between teaching and learning in FECs and HEIs is compounded by differences in level of study between HNC/D and degree courses. Getting the most out of lectures, note-taking from books and journals on reading lists, critical/analytical degree-level essay writing and exam taking techniques have all been identified as skills that are relatively underdeveloped in the course of HN study.

It is understood that FECs offer particularly good support to their students in terms of learning and study support and guidance to help the student cope with the practical

aspects of undertaking a course of study such as financial management. HEIs, as much larger institutions, and having traditionally had a different function and student intake, might not offer the same level of support and, again, articulating students might find it difficult to find the advice and support they might need to enable them to stay on a course.

## 1.2. The On Track Project

The On Track Project was developed and piloted between January and June 2002, when it was evaluated by the Project Team and further developed. It provides a pre-entry programme for groups of FEC students, delivered by trained undergraduate and postgraduate students. During the spring and/or summer terms of the 2002/3 FEC academic session, the On Track Project was delivered to 30 groups of students in 12 FECs in the WSWAF. Students who took part during this session and progressed to HEIs are now in their second semester or term of their degree programmes.

On Track's aims are to:

- Encourage students to think about articulation
- Build confidence
- Address the 'skills gap'
- Offer advice and information, eg on support services at HEIs, funding, etc

The programme is designed to achieve these aims by addressing issues of differences in teaching and learning modes between FECs and HEIs, and issues of assessment methods, learner responsibility, culture and support systems. In 2002/3 the programme comprised an introductory session followed by five two hour sessions to cover the following topics:

- Lectures and note-taking
- Reading lists and using HEI library resources
- Information gathering and reading
- Academic terminology and deconstructing questions
- Written assignments and essays
- Referencing
- Exams and revision
- Marking schemes

- HEI campus visit

A selection process was designed to ensure that tutors with appropriate experience, skills and aptitudes were recruited and they all underwent a training schedule of two three hour sessions and a training lunch developed by the On Track Project team. Postgraduate ‘tutors’ and undergraduate ‘mentors’ were paired, with tutors taking the primary role in the more formal aspects of planning and delivery of the programme while mentors provided role models and were able to speak from current experience of life at an HEI. In practice, tutor and mentor roles could be virtually indistinguishable. Throughout the rest of this report both will be referred to as tutors, except where any distinction is clear and relevant.

Tutors were encouraged to tailor the programme to the specific needs of their students and to alter the order of topics as they saw fit in order to maximise the flexibility of the programme. Core topics were generic, although tutors were encouraged to use subject-specific material for illustrative purposes and the programme could be expanded with additional subject-specific topics and materials relevant to particular courses or departments. There was a tutor’s pack and student folder, which included materials such as notes and examples, and outlines of detailed learning outcomes. Students who attended three or more of the five sessions were awarded a certificate of completion of On Track.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1. Performance Indicators**

On Track was evaluated in terms of its aims, as set out above. A set of Performance Indicators (PIs) was devised to measure how successfully On Track had achieved these aims. These are outlined below, with references to where they are discussed in this report:

#### **PIs**

- Retention at HEIs of On Track students beyond the first term against retention of all HEI students progressing from FE Colleges (**3.3**)

- On Track students' perceptions of how successful On Track was at preparing them for life at an HEI (3.4.1) and their descriptions of how they felt when they began their degree programme (3.4.2)
- On Track students perceptions of how well they were coping with degree level study (3.5.1) and their reporting of their performance in examinations and other assessed written work (3.5.2)
- On Track students perceptions of their own confidence in lecture-note taking (3.6.1), note-taking from reading (3.6.2) and using library resources (3.6.3) at their HEIs
- On Track students knowledge of who to go to for help with their studies (3.7.1) and if in financial difficulty (3.7.2)

Progression of On Track students to degree level courses is discussed in the **Findings** section, but was not included as a Performance Indicator as students who chose to participate in On Track had already decided that they might well wish to proceed to HEIs and were therefore self-selecting as more likely to proceed to degree courses than other HN students. We also discuss the problems students reported that they faced as degree students, and On Track's students' suggestions for how On Track might be improved.

## 2.2. Data and analysis

Three main research methods were used to collect and analyse appropriate quantitative and qualitative data for these PIs. Data sets included:

1. Quantitative data showing how many FEC students involved in On Track in 2002/3 progressed to degree courses in that year, at which institutions, on what courses and at what level they entered. Data from questionnaires sent to students' home addresses were used to measure retention for this sample, and were compared with relevant statistics on each HEI's retention of students beyond the first semester.
2. Quantitative and qualitative data on students' ability to cope with degree courses and the HEI environment, collected through a questionnaire distributed to all On Track participants who progressed to HEIs and, for comparative purposes, a 'control' sample of other direct entry HEI students. The questionnaire contained sections on each of the areas addressed by On Track. The questionnaire was

designed using SNAP6, survey software that was also used to analyse the data. A copy of the questionnaire is in Appendix I.

3. Qualitative data on students' subjective assessment of the effect the On Track project had on their experience of degree courses and the HEI environment, from interviews with a sample of On Track students who progressed to HEIs. This was a particularly valuable method for giving further meaning to the survey data and exploring any issues that students felt to be significant. Eleven students took part in individual interviews, using the same interview schedule but allowing respondents to develop themes and issues and the researcher to probe for greater depth. The interviews were audio-tape recorded and transcribed and the data analysed using in-depth interview qualitative analysis techniques. A copy of the interview 'schedule' is in Appendix II.

Data collection began in January 2004, after the students had experienced a full term at an HEI, which usually involved some assessments, including written assignments and examinations. The evaluation was completed, and the final report submitted, by 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2004.

### 2.3. Cohorts and samples

The evaluation was based on the work of On Track in the academic year 2002 –2003 so samples were drawn from the cohort of students entering HEIs in the academic year 2003-2004. 214 FEC students on HNC/D courses registered with On Track in 2002 but many of these did not participate further; only 129 were given a certificate of completion of the course. The On Track database showed that 12 of these had decided by June 2003 not to progress to an HEI.

Questionnaires were sent to each of the remaining 117 students at their home address as contained in the On Track database, with an SAE for return by 4<sup>th</sup> February. Only 31 of the first batch of questionnaires were returned so further efforts were made to improve the response rate. However, returns from the first batch of questionnaires were the only ones used to measure retention as the next batch of questionnaires were distributed through the HEIs and were therefore only given to students who were still attending.

The On Track Project team had some data on the planned destinations of students at the end of the 2002-3 Programme. Of the 129 students who were awarded On Track certificates, there was planned destination data, collected at the end of the Programme, for 78. In order to confirm these and to track the other 51, HEI Registry staff were contacted and asked to confirm the destinations of students who had planned to apply for degree programmes at these institutions. However, most refused to supply this information on the grounds that this would contravene data protection legislation. College staff who had been involved in organising On Track were contacted and asked to supply information on On Track students' destinations. FE College staff and the returned questionnaires confirmed HEI destinations for 96, another 5 were accepted at an HEI with deferred entry until the following year, a total of 7 continuing to study at FE College, 5 entering employment and 17 destinations unknown. Questionnaires were then sent to all students who had progressed to an HEI but had not yet returned a questionnaire, via their HEI departments. This yielded a further 9 responses, bringing the total number of completed questionnaires to 40, 42% of the cohort who were known to have progressed to an HEI.

A control group of students was drawn up for comparative purposes. These matched the On Track students in terms of subjects studied at degree level, and level of entry. HEI staff involved in wider access and, in particular, articulation routes, were asked to identify students who fitted the course and level of entry criteria and distribute questionnaires to them, asking them to return them in the SAE provided. Only 15 questionnaires were returned from this control group by the deadline of 26<sup>th</sup> February. A letter was then sent to all those On Track students who had returned questionnaires, enclosing questionnaires with SAEs and asking them to distribute these to any of their co-students who had entered the HEI via an FE College but had not participated in On Track. This yielded a further 11, bringing the total number of completed questionnaires for the control group to 26.

The University of Paisley was under-represented in this group and, consequently, so were students entering directly into Level Three (see **Section 3.2**). The researcher telephoned members of staff in appropriate departments at the University of Paisley who had some special involvement with students from FECs, in order to address this. Staff agreed to try to identify students who fulfilled the criteria for the Control Group

but found few who had not participated in the On Track Programme and had no success in increasing responses. 26 falls short of the recommended 30 for reliable statistical analysis involving any disaggregation, but the Control Group is still usable for simple, comparative purposes.

Attempts were made to telephone most of the On Track students who returned questionnaires to ask them to take part in a tape-recorded interview, but 21 were unknown or ex-directory. 15 were contacted and 11 interviews were carried out with six students attending Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU), four attending the University of Paisley (PU), and one from the University of Edinburgh (EU). This sample covered the range of courses and levels of study of the whole cohort. The interview group also reflected the range of views students had expressed in the questionnaire concerning the success of On Track in preparing them for the HEI experience.

Withdrawal rates were measured from questionnaire data with a view to comparing them with comparable cohorts in terms of level of entry, in the HEIs as a whole. However, there were major problems in accessing appropriate statistics for comparative purposes, which will be explained in **Section 3.3**.

### **3. FINDINGS**

#### **3.1. Introduction to findings**

This section presents findings from the evaluation of the On Track Project, some of which merely describe the project and related outcomes, others discuss its performance in relation to the performance indicators (PIs) outlined in **Section 2.1**. The section finishes with a discussion of how the On Track Project might be improved.

#### **3.2. Progression of On Track students to HEIs**

For this research, data on which of the certificated On Track students progressed to HEIs was gathered by the questionnaires and by telephone calls and emails to relevant staff at FE Colleges and HEIs. 96 progressed to HEIs. **Table 1** shows these destinations:

**Table1**

**On Track students' HEI destinations**

Aberdeen	Abertay	Edinburgh	Glasgow	GCU	OU	PU	Stirling	Strathclyde
1	1	2	2	44	1	40	1	4

These are merely descriptive statistics, as On Track students are self-selecting in that they chose to participate in On Track because they were interested in progressing to HEIs. Indeed, one interview participant reported that, at his FEC, only students who had already “decided one hundred per cent to go on from their HND to do a degree” were invited to participate in On Track.

There are many factors responsible for non-progression of students who had planned to progress, including failure to gain the required qualifications, financial and personal reasons. Some On Track students planned to defer entry and it is likely that others would return to Higher Education at some time in the near future. Of those who did progress and completed questionnaires, all but two answered “Yes” to the question: “Do you think that if you had not participated in On Track you would still have applied to a degree programme.” Nevertheless, this implies that two students, who both responded that they did not think that they would have applied to a degree programme, progressed to degree level study as a direct result of participating in the On Track Project.

Students entered degree courses at HEIs at various levels. **Table 2** shows the numbers and percentages (where known) going in to Years 1, 2 and 3, with the figures for Aberdeen, Abertay, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Stirling and Strathclyde aggregated. The OU is excluded as the modular structure of OU degrees is very different from that of other HEI degrees, so there is no clear ‘level of entry’ for an entire degree programme.

**Table 2**

**On Track students entering degree courses at each level (where known)**

	GCU	PU	Other
Year 1	32.4% (12)	5.5% (2)	10% (1)
Year 2	18.9% (7)	8.3% (3)	90% (9)
Year 3	48.6% (18)	86% (31)	0% (0)

This exercise revealed very different patterns for students enrolling at the different institutions, with the vast majority of Paisley's students entering at Level 3, GCU's students spread between levels, with a relatively high proportion going in to Level 1, and most of the "Other Universities" category entering at Level 2. Almost half of the On Track intake into PU's Level 3 enrolled on Sports Studies courses.

Tracking students who had taken part in On Track during the 2002/3 session was a time-consuming exercise and it was not possible to collect accurate data on all of these students. It is essential for future evaluations of On Track that students' records are kept as complete and as up-to-date as possible and that effective means of collecting and recording data on students' destinations are devised and implemented. It is understood that telephone and email addresses are being recorded for this year's On Track students, which, if consistently recorded and updated, should improve the response rates for future evaluations and improve the efficiency of future research on the On Track students' HEI experience.

On Track's potential for fulfilling its aim to "encourage students to think about articulation" is limited if it is presented specifically as a complete programme designed to prepare students for the transition to degree level study at HEIs. As Gallacher et al have shown, many students do not decide to progress to degree programmes until the middle or end of their HNC/D programme (1997:19). If the On Track Project is to reach students who may not have given much consideration to progressing to degree programmes it might be beneficial to re-design the introductory session so that it is more directly focussed on progression/articulation options, and delivered to all HNC and HND students, to encourage more students to consider these option and to optimise the participation of students who do progress to HEIs.

### 3.3. Student retention

*PI: Retention of On Track students beyond the first term at an HEI, against other students at the HEI who had progressed from FECs*

Only those returned questionnaires that were sent to students' home addresses were used because 9 of the 40 questionnaires returned by On Track participants were distributed through HEI departments in the second term, so these questionnaires were only sent to students who we know had been retained into the second semester. The questionnaires that provided data on retention/withdrawal came from 31 On Track participants. This sample is too small to disaggregate into individual HEIs attended, levels of entry or courses. Of the On Track sample of 31, 2 students had withdrawn by the start of the second semester, representing 6%. Identifying comparative results proved difficult as PU and GCU were unable to provide statistics on withdrawal by the beginning of the second semester of students entering with HNQs. The closest comparison came from findings provided by PU on withdrawal of direct entry students in 2000/01, most of whom withdrew before February. The difficulties in tracking On Track students mean that there is no reliable indication of their withdrawal rates and we cannot compare the sample we have with all direct entry students in PU, as the two groups are not comparable in terms of level of entry, courses and, of course, HEI attended.

It is crucial for future evaluations that records of students' postal and email addresses are kept as up-to-date as possible. This would mean that many more students could be contacted at their home addresses, and the data on retention would be more robust. In order to compare retention/withdrawal of On Track students with other, comparable students who did not take part in the On Track Project, appropriate statistics need to be provided by HEI staff, who would have to be approached some time in advance of the evaluation to ensure that they are able to produce the necessary statistics. It would be valuable for On Track to measure the withdrawal/retention rates of its students against others in the future and appropriate procedures should be planned and put in place at the earliest opportunity in order to measure this for the 2003/4 cohort.

### 3.4. Overall success of the On Track Project

This was evaluated with reference to students reporting of how successful they felt the On Track Project had been in preparing them for life at an HEI, and their descriptions of how they felt in the very early stages of their degree programme.

#### *3.4.1. PI: On Track students' perceptions of how successful On Track was at preparing them for life at an HEI*

On Track students were asked "How successful do you think On Track was at preparing you for life at an HEI?" The results were as follows:

*Very successful* .....30%  
*Quite successful*.....50%  
*Not very successful*.....12.5%  
*Not at all successful*.....5%

80% of On Track students reported that the project was quite or very successful. The next question in the questionnaire asked students to outline ways in which On Track might be improved and many of these students used this space to endorse On Track and comment on its usefulness to them. In the interviews, students were given the opportunity to discuss the strengths of On Track in detail and explain how they felt that it had been successful in preparing them for life at an HEI. Students pointed out that major barriers to a successful transition to an HEI were: ignorance of how degree courses operated and what was required of degree students; acceptance of a 'mythology' about life at an HEI received from inaccurate accounts; the tendency of students to assume that the approach they took to life and study at an FEC would continue to be appropriate at an HEI. These barriers will be discussed throughout these findings, especially in **Sections 3.5** and **3.6**. In the interviews, the On Track tutors' function as role models and their approachability and willingness to answer questions were frequently discussed in relation to breaking down these barriers. For example:

"It gave me the background information to come. It's like they couldn't tell me what my experience was going to be like but they just prepared me, you might come up against this and that, and I think because we were all mature students as well it was like just talking and alleviating your fears, and just giving you the groundwork."

And:

“The tutors were very good. The two chaps, because they were students themselves, they were able to put it across and tell us “Well you might get a lot of support (at College) whereas at University it’s up to you to do the work and no-one will come chasing after you if you don’t do it. So I think they were quite clear about it.

The majority of respondents clearly felt that On Track had had a positive effect but, given that only 30% reported that it was *very* successful and a sizeable minority reported that it was less than successful, there is clearly some room for improvement. However, many respondents suggested that there was a limit to what On Track *could* do to prepare students for life at an HEI, especially for the independent learning required and the critical thinking on which exams and written work would be based. As one respondent explained:

“On independent learning it sort of opened your eyes to see what it would be like, but I don’t think it totally prepared you fully because until you actually experience the situation, you go through it, you don’t realise how stressfull it can be. But it certainly gave you an idea of what lay ahead.”

And another, discussing critical thinking:

“I don’t personally think they prepared us for it but I don’t think they really could have. I don’t think there’s any way, other than terrifying the life out of you, which they probably would have done. I don’t think there’s any way to really explain that, that what they want is far more analysis, don’t just regurgitate text books and what you’ve learned in class; really think about it, plan it out properly.”

One possible solution to this that was suggested a number of times in both the questionnaires and the interviews was that HNQs themselves might be adapted, especially towards the end of the HND programme, to demand more independent study, critical thinking and depth of understanding, which could all be demonstrated in written assignments. The general consensus was that the best the On Track Project

could do to prepare students for the independent learning and critical thinking required at HEIs was to explain to students what lay ahead and encourage them to feel confident in their ability to meet the challenges. This in itself was perceived as a very valuable aspect of the work of the Project, especially in combination with learning key skills necessary for degree level study.

#### *3.4.2. PI: On Track students' descriptions of how they felt when they began their degree programme*

In the questionnaire, students were asked which of a number of expressions described how they felt during their first week at university, and invited to tick all those that applied (see Q25, Appendix II). There were few significant differences between the responses of the On Track sample and the Control Group, with “Nervous” and “Excited” achieving the highest scores of around 80% and 60% respectively for both groups. However, scores for three expressions showed marked differences between the samples: “16% more of the On Track students than the Control Group ticked “Well prepared”, 22% fewer On Track students ticked “An outsider” and 17% fewer ticked “Terrified”. These scores suggest that On Track might have had a positive effect on students’ sense of preparedness and belonging when they begin life at an HEI, and reducing anxiety.

Those parts of the On Track programme that successfully addressed the skills gap might have increased overall confidence and sense of preparedness, and the ‘mentoring’ role of the undergraduate tutors seems to have been beneficial in helping to give students the confidence to face the challenges of their new environment. There were many mentions in the interviews of how the On Track tutors ‘eased their nerves’. This quote comes from a mature student:

“I went with that fear anyway, so sitting down and talking to people, getting the experience from someone who went into it later on in life as well. He explained, “It will be scary but that’s why we’re here.” It’s trying to alleviate those fears and I found that helpful, just talking to somebody who had been through it as well.”

There is always a danger that informing people that they are about to face new challenges such as an intensified workload, more self-directed study, longer essays

and closed-book examinations might have a detrimental effect by inducing fear rather than confidence. It is important that On Track tutors handle this with sensitivity and many interview respondents were full of praise for their tutors in this respect. For example:

“I thought they were very good at explaining things and very positive in answering questions about how to cope with University.....They related their experience to try and help you along.....and they say “Don’t worry if you feel intimidated because I felt that way”, and it kind of put you at ease more.....because they’re happy to answer questions and tend to kind of ease your mind that it’s not as bad”

Only one On Track student attended a bridging course offered by the HEI to which they progressed, whereas four of the twenty six of the Control Group did so. In the interviews, respondents reported that they had been unable or unwilling to attend such courses and/or that they had expected other bridging courses to merely duplicate the On Track experience. Some regretted not attending these courses, explaining that they had heard from other students who had attended that the experience had been very worthwhile, especially in terms of preparation for a particular HEI and because these more extended courses gave students practical experiences key skills such as researching materials, taking lecture notes, giving presentations. Others, however, did not feel that it would have been worth the time spent and some were simply unable to attend because of other commitments. Including information on the bridging courses and activities the HEIs have to offer in one of the On Track sessions would enable students to make an informed choice regarding whether or not to attend.

### 3.5. Coping with degree level study

One measure of the success of the On Track Project was how positive the participants’ subjective assessments were of how well they were coping with their degree courses. On Track aims to build confidence and address the skills gap, and achievement of these aims would be reflected in students’ positive perception of their ability to cope with degree level study. Another measure is how well students perform in examinations and assessed assignments on their degree programmes.

**3.5.1. PI:** *On Track students' perceptions of how well they were coping with degree level study*

There were no significant differences between the On Track sample and the Control Group in terms of their responses to the question: "How well do you feel you are coping with the work on your current course?" as these results show:

	<u>On Track Sample</u>	<u>Control Group</u>
<i>Very well</i>	15%	8%
<i>Quite well</i>	70%	85%
<i>Not very well</i>	10%	8%
<i>Not at all well</i>	2.5%	0%

The fact that 85% of the On Track students report that they are coping quite or very well is a very positive result, especially considering that the On Track sample had a much higher proportion of students who entered directly into Level 3 than the Control Group. Here a Level 3 student explains the positive contribution On Track had made to her ability to cope with her course:

"It has been hard work but I would say I would have definitely struggled more if I hadn't been to the course and taken in the advice about the lectures and the exams, because I'd have probably gone to about November or December last year without having known what an exam question actually looked like, what it was like in terms of University"

**3.5.2. PI:** *On Track students reporting of their performance in examinations and other assessed written work*

The evaluation was carried out during and shortly after the period when many of them had their first examinations so most were still awaiting results for many or all of these and the number of students who had received results for all their examinations was too small to provide reliable quantitative data. The On Track Project's coverage of academic terminology and deconstructing questions (discussed below) was an aspect of preparation for HEI examinations and many On Track students spoke of how much they had benefited from it, as this student points out:

“They told us what exam questions were like and how you should spend equal time on each of the things. I can’t really remember if we actually got shown the proper way to take the exams but we did get shown what the exams were going to be like.....They did a wee exercise where they showed us a question and they said “Pick out the key words from this question, which meant you’re focussing in on the main points so you don’t wander off the subject.....So that was a help anyway.”

However, in the questionnaires and the interviews respondents singled out preparation for examinations and examination technique as an area which was not always covered, or which might have been covered more extensively, which would have been of benefit to them. For example:

“They didn’t really talk so much about exams, it was more about the assignments that everyone was worried about because it was going to be such a step up from College, going to University.

Here we see the dangers of allowing the students themselves to determine the extent to which topics are covered, as their judgments of what is most relevant and important are not based on a sound understanding of what lies ahead. This again requires skilful handling by On Track tutors so that students are prepared for the challenge without being made to feel anxious.

Exam revision and exam technique demonstrate the confusion and anxiety that can arise when students try to apply the approaches they used in College to degree level work, as these students explain:

“What we done in College was memorise our essays and go in and regurgitate it and just write it down. You can’t do that at University, you can’t. I tried to remember four different essays for my first Politics exam and then beat myself up after it!”

And:

“I think they (On Track) could have done a wee bit more on certainly the approach to exams. I didn’t expect I’d have to do quite as much work and I think in some ways

I've maybe done too much work for the exams.....I tried to cover the whole course! I tried to do everything, whereas other people took certain parts out of it and said "I'm only going to concentrate on that, because they knew they'd have a choice of questions."

Passing examinations is key to success at an HEI and knowledge of how to approach examinations and revision is key to students' confidence in their ability to succeed without suffering too much anxiety. It is therefore crucial that the On Track programme always devotes time to these topics, with special reference to how degree examinations differ from HNQ assessments.

In the questionnaires some On Track student (and students from the Control Group) singled out exam revision and exam sitting as a problem they had encountered at their HEI for which they would have liked to have been better prepared. One student On Track participant summed up comments of others in response to the question: How might On Track be improved?" with:

"Exam techniques - study tips, - expectations/standards. I found it difficult to adjust to exams – tried to learn everything in depth – now realise this isn't necessary."

More students were able to report on their performance in assessed, written work such as essays and reports. A small proportion of On Track students (4 of the 28 who were able to report on their essay results, or 14%) reported failure to achieve pass marks in some of their written assignments, but nevertheless these students achieved pass marks for most of them. None of the Control Group reported that they had failed to achieve pass marks in any of theirs. The data are not sufficiently robust for any reliable comparison to be made between those who did and did not participate in On Track.

The difference between approaches to essay-writing at HEIs and at FECs was clearly a major issue for some On Track students. These differences include: gathering evidence from reading (discussed below in 3.6); analysis and critical evaluation; writing "at a deeper level", as some students put it; structure of essays; the practicalities of referencing. In the interviews the On Track sessions on essay writing

were often singled out as being among the most beneficial in the whole programme. Discussing the session on academic terminology and deconstructing questions, one said:

“I referred back to that on the first essay that I had to do. There’s quite a lot of academic jargon in (her subject) and it’s really quite hard, you’re sitting with your books and a dictionary, every single time you’re reading something. And different lecturers explain things in different ways.....it was good to actually deconstruct the questions”

And another:

“how to break down (the questions) and highlight the main relevant points in it.....at College I would take the whole sort of question and just put it into my head rather than breaking it down into the different stages, so that was quite useful.”

An exercise that was reported to have been particularly useful in helping students to understand what was required of them in terms of essay writing at an HEI was the comparison between two of the On Track tutors’ own essays, one of which was given a relatively high mark and the other a much lower mark. This was described as an effective way of giving students an insight into the standard of essay expected at degree level.

There were, however, students in the On Track sample who reported that essay-writing was not covered sufficiently and some students who were interviewed made this point. Even among those who described the essay writing part of the programme as useful some suggested that it should be extended. One argued that the On Track session on this was too simplistic:

“There was actually one on how to write essays and it was: A beginning; a middle and an end.....we knew how to do that, we weren’t that bad, you know.....one of the girls was actually quite insulted”

Referencing conventions were frequently referred to in both the questionnaires and the interviews and it seemed that they sometimes had a symbolic importance as an exemplar for the differences between HNQ and degree level study. Again, where this was properly covered and the commonest referencing system (Harvard) shown, with examples, most students seemed to feel that they had learned something that would stand them in good stead for their time at an HEI. Conversely, students expressed remarkable anxiety if they did not understand how to reference their written work.

Essay writing is another key area and one that On Track students recognised, with hindsight, to have been very useful to them when it was covered well and especially by tutors who recognised the approach to essay writing taken by HNQ students, and the difference between this and the requirements of degree level essays. As with topics on exam revision and exam techniques, if the On Track Project is to maximise its positive impact on students' experience of degree level study, these topics must be well prepared and covered thoroughly.

Related to both examinations and essay writing is marking schemes. HNQ students, especially those who were achieving merits in order to enter into levels two or three at an HEI, were accustomed to getting marks in the high eighties or even higher. Those who did not appreciate the difference between degree and HNQ marking schemes could become quite distressed when they received marks in the fifties and sixties, not realising that these might be perfectly 'respectable' achievements, as this student explained:

"I got one back and it was sixty eight and I was just gutted! I thought that was the most dreadfull....When you're already struggling with your self-esteem in here, because it's been a big culture shock, I think maybe a wee bit more reassurance – seventy odd actually means you've got a great mark. I actually spent November thinking "I'm not good enough for in here!"

This student said she knew two students who actually withdrew from their courses because they were so demoralised by low marks. As with referencing, this might be a topic that can be effectively covered in relatively little time, but it is enormously

important to the students that they understand HEI marking schemes and do not expect them to be similar to HNQ marking schemes.

### 3.6. Key skills for degree level study

On Track's success at addressing the skills gap was examined by asking students how confident they felt about taking notes in lectures, note-taking from reading and using library resources at the beginning of their degree programme.

#### *3.6.1. PI: On Track students' perceptions of their own confidence in lecture-note taking*

The questionnaire asked how confident students felt about taking notes in lectures when they began their degree course. They were asked to use a scale of one to five, with one being least confident and five being most confident.

40% of the On Track sample rated their confidence at writing lecture notes at less than three, in this respect the Control Group showed similar results. While only 30% of On Track rated their confidence at lecture note taking above three, 46% of the Control Group did so. Although some On Track students may have benefited from covering this topic, for many the project does not seem to have been sufficiently successful at preparing them for lecture note taking to make them feel confident about these skills when they begin their course of study at an HEI.

Students described marked differences between the way HEI lectures and FEC lectures were conducted and, again, discussed problems arising from transferring the approach taken to lecture note-taking from the one situation to the other. For example:

“At College you're given more than enough time to take down any notes, especially if there's any written work up on the board. There's stacks of time to take the notes down, you're always taking it in longhand.”

And:

“I used to think that you had to write shorthand and accurately take all these notes.....I used to think how am I going to do it, I was so slow at writing.....I was panicking”

While some students suggested that they would have benefited from more help with lecture note-taking this was another area which had clearly been very successfully covered in some cases. Some mentioned that On Track tutors had explained that they should not try to write down every word of a lecture but should select important points and arguments. One respondent reported that she had shown the On Track handout on lecture note-taking to one of her HEI lecturers, who judged it to be excellent and photocopied it for use by his own students.

Students who are accustomed to FEC lectures in which they are expected to copy very extensive notes and given the opportunity to do so benefit greatly from familiarity with the difference between these lecture styles and those of HEI lectures, so that they do not needlessly try (and inevitably fail) to record entire lectures. Some students suggested that a campus visit that included sitting in on a lecture would be beneficial. This practical exercise in familiarisation with HEI lectures, combined with a session on lecture note-taking, might be very helpful in preparing students for this essential aspect of study at an HEI.

**3.6.2. PI:** *On Track students perceptions of their ability to take useful notes from readings*

The questionnaire asked students to rate how difficult they found taking useful notes when reading for course work when they began their degree course. In this case they were asked to use a scale of one to five, with one being least difficult and five being most difficult. Only 5% of the On Track sample rated this above 3, compared with 31% of the Control Group, suggesting that the vast majority of On Track students had gained skills in note-taking from reading by the time they began their degree course and that in this respect they might be better prepared than FEC students that did not participate in On Track. As one respondent reported in the interview:

“We’d been prepared quite well for that and it wasn’t a surprise and basically you learn your own way as you go along anyway. People use different techniques. But that was fine.”

In the questionnaires, as mentioned in **Section 3.5.2**, some students highlighted referencing as a problem they faced in writing degree level assignments. Anxiety over the use of correct referencing styles might be reduced if advice on referencing were more integrated into this section of the programme.

### *3.6.3. PI: On Track students perceptions of their own confidence about using library resources at their HEI*

Students were asked to rate their confidence about using library resources when they began their degree course, using a scale of one to five, with one being least confident and five being most confident. 37.5 of the On Track sample rated their confidence about using library resources at less than three and, again the Control Group gave very similar responses in this respect. Only 22.5 of the On Track sample rated their confidence at using library resources above three, and the Control Group ratings were not significantly different in this respect. Again, although some On Track students may have benefited from this part of the programme, many did not benefit sufficiently to feel confident at the start of their degree programme.

In the questionnaires, many students referred to the requirement that they research their coursework which involves searching out material in libraries. While some FEC students may have learned how to carry out literature searches and find their way around a library cataloguing system, many are unfamiliar with these skills and can find the scale of an HEI library daunting. Direct entry students in particular can be anxious about using library resources when many of their co-students are familiar with the system and know where to find materials relevant to their courses.

One interview respondent, who reported that he had not known what a journal was when he began his degree course and still did not know where to find journals, suggested a library tour as part of a campus visit would be a useful undertaking for On Track. HEIs offer guided tours of their libraries to incoming students and it would also be helpful if On Track tutors were to advise students about this facility so that

they can learn the system and resources available in the institution in which they will be studying.

### 3.7. Knowing who to go to for help

One of the aims of the On Track Project is to offer advice and information so that students are able to find help, should they need it, with their academic work or with practical issues, such as financial difficulties, while studying at an HEI.

#### *3.7.1 PI: On Track students' knowledge of who to go to for help with studies*

When asked in the questionnaire whether they knew who to go to for help with their studies, 80% of the On Track sample and 92% of the Control Group answered “Yes”. During the interviews, respondents pointed out that the On Track tutors would have been unable to give specific advice about this as students would be entering various HEIs, each with their own student study support arrangements and systems. Students who attended bridging courses to prepare them for the particular HEI that they planned to enter might be given more precise information on who to go to for help with their studies, and, as reported in **Section 2.4.2**, a greater proportion of the Control Group attended these courses.

Student support is another example of how assumptions based on experience at an FEC can mislead students about what HEIs provide, and this student explains that this is why it was valuable that the On Track students pointed out that there were support procedures at HEIs although they were generally less obvious than at FECs:

“Obviously each individual University has got different systems in place but they did say “You’ll be given, like, a personal tutor and then there’ll be other lines that you would take things if you’re not happy with them.....there are procedures set in place, again, go and ask about them”.....At the College it was on your doorstep”

It is important that it is explained to students that all HEIs have procedures in place to help them to access support in their studies should they need it. Examples of the procedures used at the WSWAF HEIs might be researched by the On Track team and explained to students by the On Track tutors.

### *3.7.2. PI: On Track students' knowledge of who to go to for help if in financial difficulty*

This covers only one of a range of practical issues on which students might require help and advice at an HEI, but it is the one most likely to be relevant to the highest proportion of them. The On Track sample and the Control Group showed similar results in relation to knowledge about who to go to for help with financial difficulties. In both cases around a quarter responded that they did not know.

It might be difficult for On Track tutors to advise on this as institutions vary in the support they have to offer. However, given that financial and other practical issues are so often implicated in student withdrawal (Foster et al 2002: 43) it is important that they address this by giving out what information they can and by explaining to students that help and advice are available at HEIs but that students must seek it out by looking at prospectuses and websites.

### 3.8. How might On Track be improved?

Overall, most On Track students clearly regarded the project as a success in preparing them for life and study at an HEI. This section will draw out specific topics and activities in the On Track programme that students referred to in the questionnaires and interviews as particularly beneficial, so that the On Track team can build on their successes. It will also discuss aspects of the programme that were revealed to require improvement, whether these be major or minor changes in coverage and delivery, and any criticisms students made regarding the overall approach and operation of the programme.

Students expressed the beneficial effect of being warned about what lay ahead, or “having their eyes opened”, combined with the input of, and interaction with, tutors who were approachable and encouraging. This enabled students to face their new experiences as challenges that they would be able to meet, rather than intimidating and insurmountable, obstacles. For example:

“Although they weren't going to the same University as you they could give you a broad experience, the experience they've been through, and you can pick up such a lot from somebody rather than just picking up a book and reading about it.....I was the

first one in my family to go to University so you had no experience of what it was like, and College life becomes very familiar.”

“I thought they were great. They were very enthusiastic about the programme. They were very open to any questions that we wanted to put to them.”

A number of respondents highlighted the question and answer sessions as the most useful aspect of the programme, allowing them to raise any concerns or worries they had, especially where they had built up frightening and inaccurate pictures of some aspects of life at an HEI. In the interviews, respondents suggested that it did not seem to make much difference which HEI their tutors attended but that it was far less helpful if a tutor’s experience came from studying in a very different subject area. For example, the experiences of essay writing discussed by an arts student might not be very relevant to a prospective science student. Some students also suggested that ideally, tutors should have taken the HNQ route into HEIs, so that they would understand not only what lay ahead for On Track students but also where they were coming from. This is a very pertinent point as questionnaires and the interviews revealed how powerful an influence the FEC experience can continue to exert on students after they progress to HEIs, as discussed in **Sections 3.4,5,6&7**. Tutors who have progressed via the same route are in a position to understand the differences between the types of institution and the study skills required and to help students to avoid the pitfalls of applying the approaches they took to HNQ study to degree level study.

Data from the interviews and questionnaires suggested that the more focussed sessions dealing with the practicalities and conventions of HEI study were the most effective, especially where they were combined with question and answer sessions. There were a number of criticisms in the interviews of exercises which were less directly related to specific issues concerning life and study at an HEI and it was suggested that these “wee games” represented poor use of time on an already over-stretched programme. For example:

“One thing that always stuck in my mind was, it was like a wee game thing. It was ‘think out the box’ or something.....it was towards the end of the term and we were all trying to rush and get all our course work done and it was, like, “Come in and

we'll waste an afternoon doing wee silly games.".....I think it was more trying to make it more fun and accessible than practical."

Another student reported that half of the students who went to the first session of On Track at his FEC did not return because they were put off by the role playing and group work. He too found it too abstract and insufficiently focussed on studying at an HEI and only returned after being persuaded to by a Senior Lecturer. Redesigning the programme so that the first session is for as many of an FEC's HNQ students as possible, to explain the aims of the On Track Project and to encourage students to think about progression might provide a more effective start to the programme.

Note-taking from readings and lectures and preparation for essay writing and examinations, where they were reported to have been well covered, were all clearly thought to have been very beneficial in preparing students for degree level study. Sessions on academic terminology, deconstructing questions, and referencing were referred to many times as particularly helpful and, in the interviews, many students reported that they would have benefited from more time spent on these topics.

There were a very few reports of too much time being spent on some topics and much more frequent reporting of topics being insufficiently covered, or not at all. It seems likely that encouraging On Track tutors to be led by their students' interests can mean that topics can receive insufficient attention because students at FECs are simply unaware of the significance these topics will have in an HEI setting. Even when some students might be keen to cover particular topics, they could be passed over in favour of others, as this student explained:

"A lot seemed to be sidetracked. I know one of my mates was really, really desperate to go and get referencing and he never ever found out about it. He kept asking "What about referencing", "Oh we'll do that, we'll do that, we'll come to that, we do that on the last day". But then the last day was changed to the campus visit."

Two direct entry students suggested including a session on presentations, as they had found presentations were expected of them on their degree courses. They reported

that this was a particularly nerve-wracking experience for students who had never done this before, in a class with others who had.

None of the interview respondents actually went on an HEI campus visit organised by On Track and most said that they were not aware of such an opportunity, yet many suggested, in the interviews and the questionnaires, that this would have been a useful experience. A visit that includes sitting in on a lecture to put into context the session on lecture note-taking, and a short tour of a library, would be especially appreciated, although it is understood that there would be logistical problems to overcome. In addressing these it is worth bearing in mind that, given that the distinctions between subject areas studied by tutors and prospective students has more impact on the efficacy of the project than which HEI the tutors come from, organising tours by broad subject area might be more important than matching students to the HEIs to which they intend to progress.

A frequent criticism of the programme was lack of time; that too much was condensed into a few sessions and many of the topics that were covered would have benefited by having more time allocated to them. In this situation, seemingly less pressing matters might easily be under-explored or ignored and the consequences felt by students when they progress to HEIs. At the same time, it was acknowledged that a longer programme would be difficult to fit into the FEC schedule and would take up time that some students could ill afford. However, evidence from the questionnaires and the interviews suggested that, for most people, any deficiencies of the On Track project could be addressed by ensuring that certain important topics relating to lectures, gathering and reading course material, written assignments and examinations were extensively covered by all the groups. This would be likely to involve extending the programme by increasing the number of sessions.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

The On Track Project is clearly having some success in achieving its overall aims, with some very notable successes in particular areas. Students' comments suggested

that most of the Project's deficiencies were of omission rather than commission. Overall, most students seemed to have experienced the benefits of raising their awareness of the crucial differences between HNQ study at an FEC and degree level study at an HEI, and being taught the skills required to cope with degree these differences. These differences relate to: the requirement for independent learning and responsibility for learning; an increased workload; greater depth of study; more critical thinking; different standards, expectations and assessment methods in relation to written assignments and examinations.

The On Track programme is designed to achieve its aims in five two hour sessions in which a postgraduate and an undergraduate tutor explore these differences at a broad level and focus on a range of specific skills that are required by students studying at degree level. As well as teaching key skills and explaining aspects of HEI practice and culture, the tutors provide role models for students, demonstrating a positive attitude to coping with the challenges of degree level study and promoting the belief that that On Track students will be capable of meeting these challenges. The tutors were generally considered to be inspiring, approachable and helpful and respondents stressed the value of informal question and answer sessions that enabled them to learn from HEI students' own recent experience.

It is important that tutors/mentors understand approaches to HNQ study and assessment methods as students progressing to degree level study have a tendency to fall back on these 'by default' when they are unfamiliar or uncertain of what is appropriate in their new learning environment. Tutors who understand both FEC and HEI approaches and conventions are well placed to guide students from the one to the other.

Sessions that focussed on specific skills such as referencing, preparing for examinations or taking notes from lectures were generally considered to have been very useful when the topics were given adequate coverage. However, it seems that coverage of these topics was patchy, with some groups giving a lot less time to some important topics than other groups. This seems to be related to the fact that tutors are encouraged to respond to the students and adapt the sessions to concentrate on those topics that give students most cause for concern or anxiety. While this can be an

effective strategy for alleviating anxiety and developing a sense of preparedness, it can mean that students are under-prepared for those challenges that they might face in an HEI setting that they were quite unaware of while studying at their FEC. A campus visit, to include a lecture and library tour might help students to understand what to expect, and provide a context to help them to help them to make sense of some of the new skills they will be learning.

While it may be difficult for tutors to give precise information on support provision and procedures in HEIs (each having their own versions) it might be useful for them to research these sufficiently to give examples of what is in place. They also need to explain that this area is another that requires students to take responsibility for themselves and seek out help where required.

Although the On Track programme is designed to provide discrete and comprehensive bridging support for students who may not be able to make use of support provided by HEIs, such as bridging courses and library tours, it would be helpful if On Track tutors were to outline their content and availability so that students can decide whether they might benefit from attending.

Overall, in order to ensure that all topics are properly covered, sufficient time is allowed for question and answer sessions and the additional topics/sessions suggested by On Track students and by this research, the Project may need to be extended to allow more time for the programme.

Finally, it is important to address the limitations of the data available for this research and plan procedures to enable future evaluations to collect robust data for reliable quantitative performance indicators.

## **5. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Continue to recruit and train tutor/mentors to be enthusiastic, approachable and reassuring role-models

- Recruit as tutor/mentors undergraduate students who entered HEIs via the HNQ route to ensure that they understand crucial differences between studying for HNQs and degree level study
- Where possible, match tutors' broad academic subject areas to those of students
- Design an introductory session aimed at all HNC/D students in each FEC to encourage more to consider progression to degree level study and to optimise the participation of students in the Project
- Sessions should maintain a focus on topics relating to, and key skills required for, degree level study at HEIs, and the importance of these topics for degree level study should be explained to participating students
- Ensure that key skills such as exam preparation, exam-taking techniques, lecture note-taking, understanding academic terminology, deconstructing questions, essay writing, referencing and using library resources are sufficiently covered in all groups
- Cover topics such as essay writing, lectures, examinations, researching, reading and marking schemes with reference to how HNQ study approaches may not be appropriate for degree level study in an HEI
- Continue to run sessions with both teaching/demonstration/practice and question/answer elements
- Ensure that students understand that support and advice concerning their academic studies and practical issues is available at HEIs but that they must be pro-active in accessing it. It would be helpful if tutors were to outline the support procedures in place in HEIs
- Include information on bridging courses and activities offered by HEIs so that students may make informed choices about whether to attend them
- Advise students about guided library tours offered by HEIs to incoming students
- Liaise with HEIs to organise campus visits, ideally to include a lecture and a library tour
- Increase the number of sessions to ensure extensive and effective coverage of all topics and allow sufficient time for questions/answers

- Design and implement effective means of collecting, recording and updating data on students' destinations and contact details, to facilitate tracking for future evaluations
- Design methods of comparing On Track participants' withdrawal/retention rates with those of comparable groups and request the co-operation of relevant HEI staff in this to facilitate future evaluations

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