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Who are the Sussex Learning Network Students?

An analysis of the nature and
experience of students following
courses supported by the SLN

A report for the Sussex Learning Network
by
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Executive Summary

The Project

The Sussex Learning Network (SLN) supported 642 learners between 2006 and 2008 to study vocational higher education courses in Sussex, through the provision of Additional Student Numbers (ASNs) to local institutions. The intention was to support learners to access HE through flexible and work-based routes that would particularly appeal to non-traditional learners such as those who are currently working or those that are seeking to enter HE with vocational qualifications. The SLN required information on the extent to which its aims had been met and as a result needed to understand the nature and experience of the SLN learner cohort. The project was commissioned to collect qualitative and quantitative data that would enable the SLN to measure its own effectiveness in attracting and meeting the needs of a new, targeted learner cohort.

Methodology

- Data Analysis - Understanding the SLN Cohort

Working with Northbrook College Sussex and the Universities of Brighton, Chichester and Sussex, data was obtained which allowed the compilation of detailed information relating to the 642 students in the SLN cohort for 2006/7 and 2007/8. This data was analysed and aggregated based on selected Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data codes.

- On-Line Survey - Collecting Quantitative Data

An on-line survey was issued via the host institutions to students on all the 2006/7 and 2007/8 courses that contained SLN students. Responses were received from 65 students representing 10% of the SLN cohort. This enabled a detailed picture of the nature, experience, priorities and decision-making criteria of a sample of the SLN cohort learners.

- Interviews and Focus Groups – Qualitative Data

Five face-to-face interviews and five telephone interviews were completed with students in the SLN cohort that had signalled their willingness to participate via the on-line survey. Two focus groups covering 17 students on two courses also took place. This added qualitative data to the quantitative sources outlined above and deepened the understanding of the impact of the SLN-supported provision and its affect on learners' access to and experience of higher education.

Survey Results

- The main themes emerging from the survey include:
 - Awareness of foundation degrees
 - Course organisation
 - Student communication

- Progression routes
- Popularity of vocational higher education

Conclusions

- The SLN cohort showed a diversity of student backgrounds, life stages and ages that suggested that the SLN is making progress in opening up access to higher education to an increasingly diverse cohort of learners.
- Students respond very positively to the practical and vocational nature of their courses.
- Students do not associate the positive aspects of their courses with the brand of 'foundation degree'; few students had chosen their course because it was a foundation degree and those currently undertaking foundation degrees were unable to name the key characteristics of this type of course.
- The main areas for improvement identified by students include the need for better organisation of courses, better communication with students and specific improvements related to course design and delivery.
- There is sometimes a lack of clarity around progression from foundation degree to honours degree. It is not always clear to which honours degrees students can progress, and what conditions they will have to satisfy to do so.

Recommendations

- The SLN and provider institutions should continue to build on the work done so far to open up access to part-time vocational courses, extend age diversity and extend access to those with no or low level qualifications.
- There is a need for the SLN and provider institutions to ensure that marketing and IAG services are effective so that the true nature and benefits of vocational higher education, especially foundation degrees, are available and clear to the target audience.
- There is an opportunity for provider institutions to focus marketing activity on the popular practical aspects of courses, legislative drivers of demand in some sectors and the benefits to local students of attending their local college/university. Particular attention should be paid to provider websites as the most common information source for prospective students.
- Provider institutions should review the effectiveness of course organisation, design and communication with students and ensure that student feedback mechanisms are effective in giving early warning of areas for improvement.
- Provider institutions should ensure that there is greater clarity and consistency regarding progression routes, especially from foundation degrees to honours degree top up provision. The availability of, and conditions attached to these progression routes, and the timely communication of this information are key areas for improvement in some provider institutions.

1. Background

1.1 The Research Project

1.1.1 The Sussex Learning Network (SLN) supported 642 learners between 2006 and 2008 to study vocational higher education courses in Sussex, through the provision of Additional Student Numbers (ASNs) to local provider institutions. The intention was to support learners to access HE through flexible and work-based routes that would particularly appeal to non-traditional learners. The SLN required information on the extent to which its aims had been met and as a result needed to understand the nature and experience of the SLN learner cohort (the above mentioned 642 students). To this end this research project was commissioned to collect qualitative and quantitative data that will enable the SLN to measure its own effectiveness in attracting and meeting the needs of a new, targeted learner cohort.

1.2 The Target SLN Learner Cohort

1.2.1 The use of ASNs was intended to increase access and take up of vocational HE provision in Sussex. Provider institutions were able use some level of discretion as to how this might be achieved but were encouraged to focus on vocational provision that would:

- Appeal to potential students with vocational backgrounds and qualifications
- Appeal to potential students that were working
- Provide additional places on existing vocational courses to meet high demand
- Support the development of new areas of the curriculum in response to demand
- Enable potential students to overcome barriers to access such as geography, family or caring commitments, lower prior academic attainment
- Encourage student diversity

1.3 Other Research

This research project is set in the context of a number of other significant research reports published recently.

1.3.1 Firstly, the Papworth Report¹ prepared for the Sussex Learning Network earlier this year found that awareness and understanding of the concept of foundation degrees was low amongst potential and existing students and suggested that there was much work to be done in raising awareness of the benefits and availability of vocational higher education. The ASNs allocated through provider institutions provided a catalyst to address this issue, creating an opportunity to promote the nature and availability of new vocational courses through press releases and promotion of the increased number of places available to local students, as well as through targeted marketing campaigns, opening up information and access to a wider range of students. In particular the Papworth Report found that:

¹ Foundation Degree Marketing & Development, Papworth Research & Consultancy, Jan 2008

- The word ‘foundation’ was a source of confusion for students with an implication of lower level study or of vocational study, which was by its perceived nature at a lower level.
- Most of the existing foundation degree students had only undertaken a foundation degree on the recommendation of their chosen institution when discussing appropriate courses in their chosen subject area.
- Few students used the services of an IAG agency, relying instead on the Internet or other information from their chosen provider.
- Key messages about the benefits of foundation degrees are not widely understood e.g. it can lead to an honours degree, flexibility of study options and entry requirements, vocational, practical nature, improved employability and earnings potential
- Marketing activities need to convey these messages in a hard hitting way
- More training and support is needed for IAG practitioners.

1.3.2 Secondly, HEFCE’s Interim Evaluation of Lifelong learning Networks² gives context and background to this research. The report defines the overall objective of LLNs as ‘to improve the coherence clarity and certainty of progression opportunities for vocational learners into and through higher education’. At this stage in the lifecycle of LLNs the report acknowledges that it is too early to make ‘substantive and well evidenced statements’ about progress towards the LLN goal. However, the report recommends that increasingly LLNs need to ‘monitor their own activities and outcomes on a regular basis...to gain some sense of the extent to which they are adding value’. The report highlights the SLN as an example of good practice in setting benchmarks for monitoring its activities including the allocation and use of ASNs.

ASNs are a key catalyst for inspiring meaningful partnership and activity with provider institutions, allowing those institutions to expand student numbers in vocational HE. ASNs provide an opportunity to address some of the issues arising from the Papworth Report by expanding the capacity, access and number of places available to adults and those that are work based. The report acknowledges that this is an activity that is ‘a much more difficult and time-consuming task’. The HEFCE report states in relation to ASNs that ‘there is little detailed data on actual student numbers and progression’ and calls for ‘a better sense of how ASNs have been used in practice’. This report gathers data on the nature of the ASN/LLN learners (known in this report as the SLN cohort) and their experiences of higher education.

1.3.3 Thirdly, HEFCE’s May 2008 report on the nature of foundation degree students³ gives some basis for benchmarking the Sussex data emerging from this study. The report gives information on the national profile of foundation degree students especially in relation to:

- full or part time study
- gender split
- age profile
- highest entry qualifications

² Interim Evaluation of Lifelong Learning Networks, a report to HEFCE by the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information, The Open University, April 2008

³ Foundation Degrees, Key Statistics 2001 – 2008, HEFCE, May 2008

- student satisfaction levels
- progression

This gives some basis on which to make a judgement as to whether the SLN cohort mirrors the national foundation degree cohort. However, such comparisons must be treated with care as only 75% of the SLN cohort for 2006-8 was following foundation degrees. Wherever possible and relevant the HEFCE data has been used to contextualise the information presented in this report regarding the nature and experience of the SLN cohort.

2. Methodology

2.1 Part 1 - Understanding the SLN Cohort – Data Analysis

2.1.1 The first objective was to understand the profile of the 642 students that comprised the SLN learner cohort.

Working with the provider institutions of Northbrook College Sussex and the Universities of Brighton, Chichester and Sussex, a series of data sets was obtained which allowed the compilation and analysis of detailed information relating to the SLN learner cohorts for 2006/7 (176 students) and 2007/8 (466 students). These data sets were taken from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) return⁴ with the exception of Northbrook College Sussex where the source was the HEIFES return. This data was analysed and aggregated with those data sets that were of most relevance to the aims of the project being selected and is presented graphically in section 3 of this report.

2.2 Part 2 – Student Survey

2.2.1 The student survey was designed to build on the quantitative data emerging from Part 1. The intention was to learn more about the nature of the SLN learner cohort and add qualitative and experiential data to the body of information held. The following areas were to be covered:

- a) The background and profile of the SLN student. A breakdown of factors such as age, gender, residence, ethnicity, and highest qualification on entry to higher education. This would also address whether students were in employment, and if so whether their work was directly related to their course; whether they were studying full or part-time, and whether they had any family or caring responsibilities.
- b) The factors that influenced the SLN student's choice to study, and their choice of what to study, at higher education level. This would explore what resources students accessed to support them with their decision, and who they spoke to during their decision making process. It would also look at the student's motivation to progress to higher education, and to study their chosen subject.

⁴ Details of the HESA categories can be found at www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_collins&task=show_manuals&Itemid=233&r=06011

- c) The on-course experience of the SLN student, including how the course content and mode of study met their expectations, and how their experience on the course was shaping their future plans.
- d) The future study and/or career aspirations of the SLN student and the factors which influenced their plans at that specific stage in their studies.

On Line Survey

2.2.2 The SLN learner cohort is not only large but also spread across over 46 different courses at 9 different provider institutions. SLN learners form the entirety of some of these courses and only a small part of others. As a result it was agreed that the most effective way of gaining feedback from the 642 students in the cohort was via an on-line survey. The Bristol On-Line Survey (BOS) was used as the flexibility of this system matched the needs of the survey and the SLN had already experienced good results from its use. A set of survey questions was created and agreed with the SLN team as being most appropriate to elicit the information required – see Appendix 1. Outcomes from the Papworth Report⁵ were used as guidance for setting question criteria relating to student choices to study at HE level and regarding choice of course.

2.2.3 Due to issues of confidentiality and the practicalities of where the data was held, provider institutions were asked to distribute an e-mail introducing the survey to all students on all courses that contained SLN learners. It was decided that it was too complex to ask institutions to isolate SLN learners for communication purposes so survey responses were requested from a wider cohort and then sifted so that only those from SLN learners formed part of the evaluation. An incentive of entering a draw to win an iPod Touch (worth £200) was offered in return for a completed survey. The survey was open for completion between 29th February and the 28th March 2008. 96 responses were received, 65 of which were from SLN learners representing 10.1% of the SLN learner cohort. The results of the survey are presented in section 4 of this report.

Interviews

2.2.4 Semi structured interviews were chosen to allow a consistency of exploration as well as the flexibility to pursue any particular relevant avenues of enquiry that emerged from the on-line survey. The interviews allowed exploration of attitudinal, motivational and experiential aspects of the learners' reflection of their participation in HE as well as their further aspirations. The interviews provided qualitative data that was essential to understanding the SLN learner profile. It was decided to carry out 5 face-to-face and 5 telephone interviews. The on-line survey had been designed to offer the opportunity for respondents to volunteer to take part in the face-to-face or telephone interviews with an offer of a further incentive of a £15 or £10 Amazon voucher respectively. Of the 65 survey respondents 15 offered to do either a telephone or face-to-face interview, 4 offered a face-to-face interview only and 16 offered only a telephone interview. From these volunteers 10 were chosen initially on the basis of first to respond and then checking for gender balance, age, mix of courses, mix of institutions, work circumstances, highest entry qualifications and year of

⁵ Foundation Degree Marketing & Development – Papworth Research & Consultancy 2008

entry. A semi structured interview schedule was agreed with SLN based on the project specification and any issues emerging from the on-line survey. This schedule can be seen at Appendix 2. Interviews were carried out between 28th May and 2nd June. Face-to-face interviews took place on the premises of provider institutions with the provider's prior permission. The outcomes of the interviews are summarised in section 5 of this report.

Focus Groups

2.2.5 In order to expand the survey sample still further and to ensure a range of research methods had been used to maximise the validity of the information received it was decided to hold 2 focus groups. For practical and logistical reasons it was decided to hold focus groups with students on a particular course before or after their usual lectures were taking place. The choice of course was based on the number of SLN learners on the course and the overall mix of students in the survey as a whole by year of entry and by institution. Two focus groups were held one on the 30th May (3 2nd Year Foundation Degree students) and one on 2nd June (15 1st Year Foundation Degree students). A semi structured interview schedule was devised based once again on the project brief but adapted for a focus group situation. This can be seen at Appendix 3. A summary of the outcomes of the focus groups can be seen in section 5 of this report.

2.3 Student Survey Sample

The project brief required that the student survey would identify a total of 50 students, 20 from the 2006/07 cohort (40%), and 30 from those enrolling in 2007/08 (60%). The split of the actual SLN learner cohort was 176 students starting in 2006/7 (27%) and 466 in 2007/8 (73%). The split of survey participants (interviews and focus groups) achieved was 15 2006/7 students out of the 82 participants (18%). There were 12 (18%) on-line survey respondents from an SLN cohort response of 65. Unfortunately there was a low turnout for the 2006/7 focus group of only 3 students, which undermined the plan to increase the proportion of 2006/7 students in the sample through focus group participation. Of the survey participants interviewed 3 out of the 10 were 2006/7 starters (30%). The table below summarises the above:

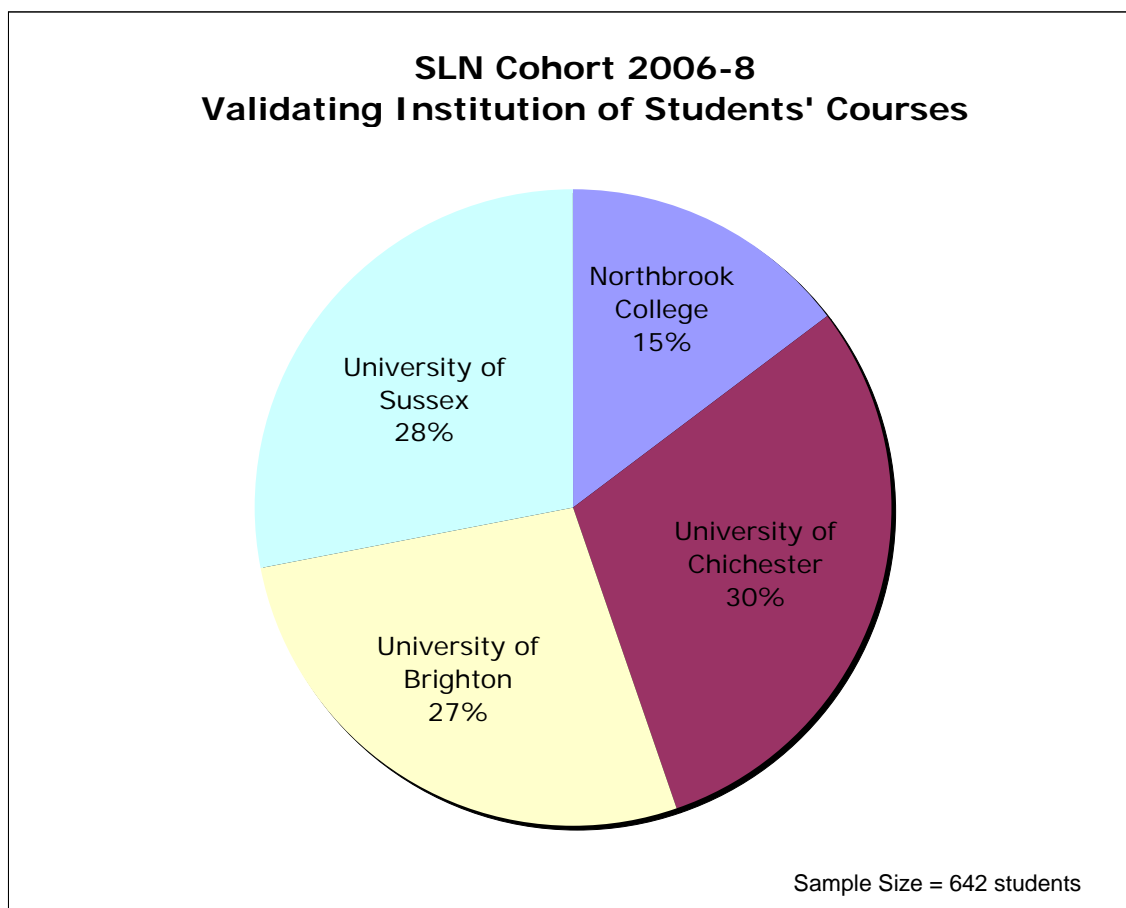
Activity	Students starting 2006/7	Students starting 2007/8	Total students
Required Project Mix	20 (40%)	30 (60%)	50
SLN learner cohort	176 (27%)	466 (73%)	642
Online survey respondents	12 (18%)	53 (82%)	65
Focus groups	3 (18%)	14 (82%)	17
Total Survey participants	15 (18%)	67 (82%)	82
Participants interviewed	3 (30%)	7 (70%)	10

3. Characteristics of the SLN Learner Cohort

As stated at section 2, HESA data was collected from the 4 validating institutions, Northbrook College Sussex and the Universities of Brighton, Chichester, and Sussex. This enabled the analysis of information on the characteristics of the 642 students that formed the SLN learner cohort from 2006-2008.

The results cover both the nature of courses followed by the SLN learner cohort, the institutions involved as well as the characteristics of the students themselves.

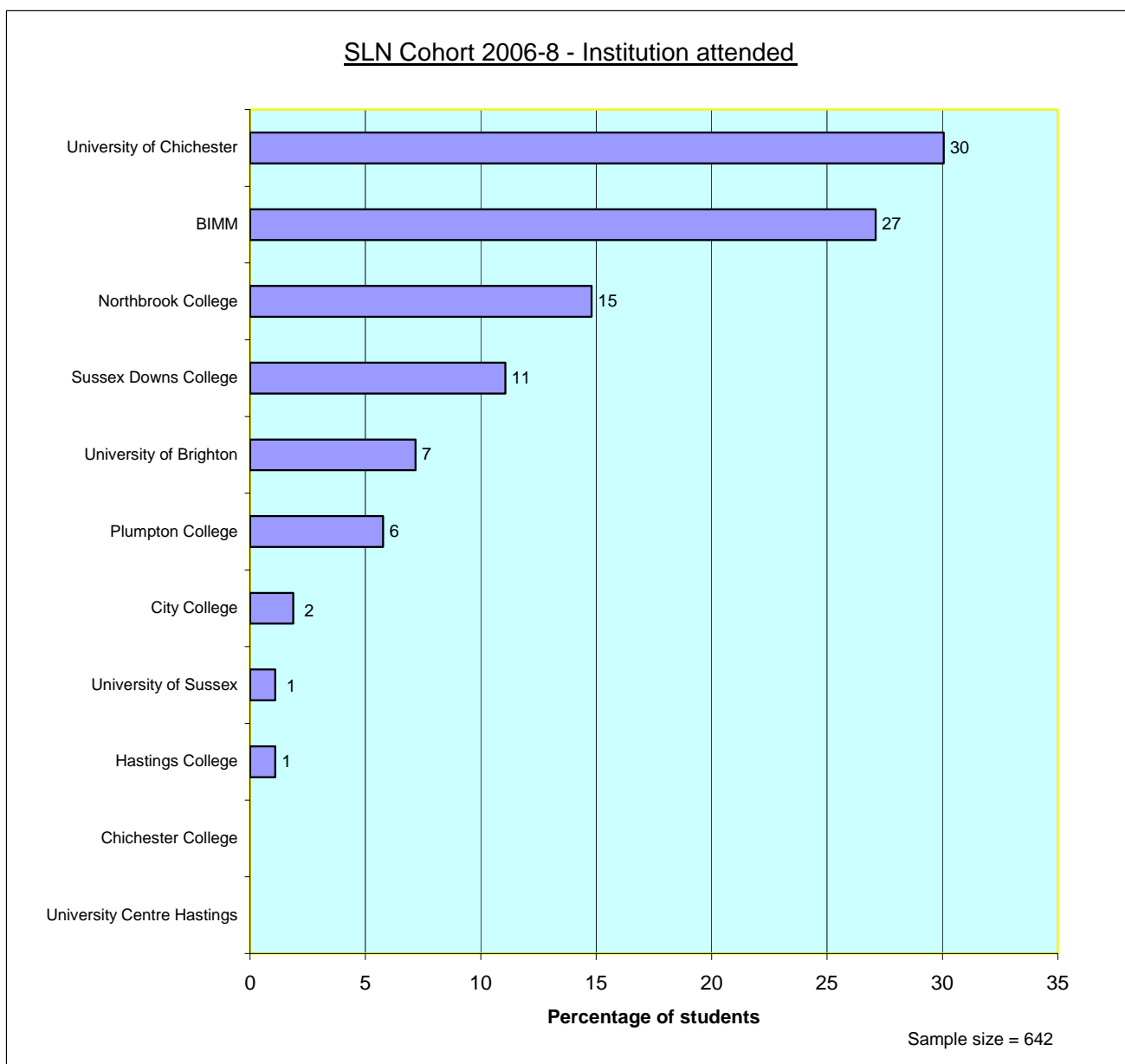
Graph 3.1



Graph 3.1 shows the percentage split of students in the SLN cohort that were registered at each of the 4 validating institutions.

Figures obtained for the 4 validating institutions show that for the 2006 and 2007 intakes the SLN cohort represented 4.2% of the Northbrook College Sussex total intake, for the University of Brighton this figure was 0.8%, the University of Chichester, 3.8% and the University of Sussex, 1.5%.

Graph 3.2



Graph 3.2 shows the percentage of the SLN cohort that attended each of 11 provider institutions. This includes more institutions than graph 3.1.1 as providers such as BIMM, Sussex Downs College, Plumpton College, City College and Hastings College have their courses validated by the institutions on the previous graph. The level of SLN learners on each course varies from isolated individuals on a course to 100% coverage.

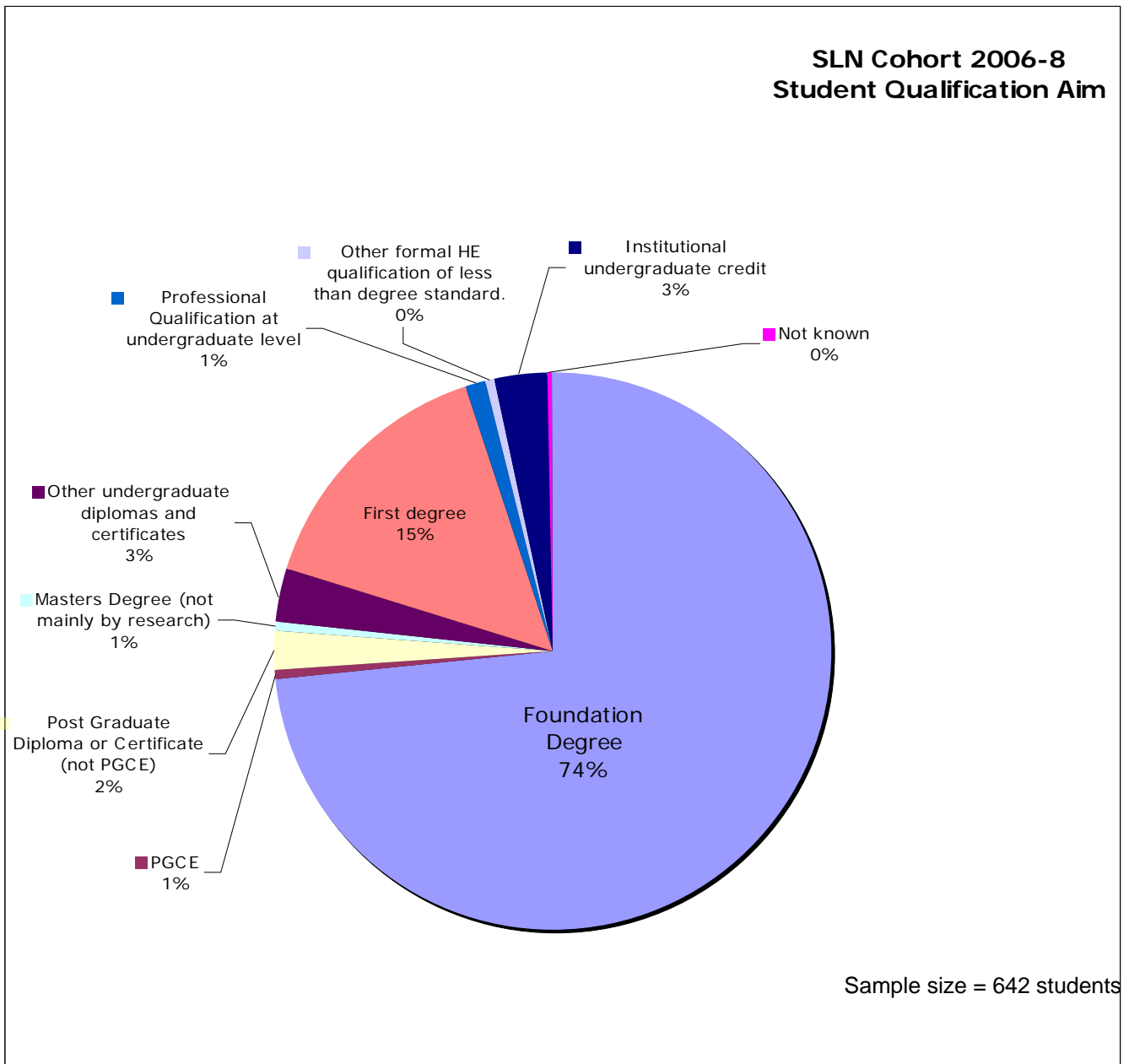
With only 35% of students attending a further education college this is significantly lower than national HEFCE figures for foundation degrees where 56% of students are studying at further education colleges.

Graph 3.3

COURSE ATTENDED	%
FD in Professional Musicianship	27.1
FD in Theatre Arts	5.8
FD in Music Production	5.6
FD Sports Coaching and Development	5.0
BSC (Hons) Sports Coaching Science	5.0
FD in Instrumental & Vocal Teaching	3.7
FD Early Childhood	3.7
Continuing Professional Development	3.3
FD Animal Science	2.8
BA (Hons) Music and Music Technology	2.8
BSC in Sport and Exercise Psychology	2.6
PG Cert E-learning Design	2.3
FD Early Years Care & Education	2.3
Certificate in Introduction to Social Work	2.0
FD in Health & Social Care	2.0
FD Fine Art	1.9
FD in Adventure Education	1.9
Commercial Music	1.9
FD Digital Media Design	1.6
FD Computing	1.6
FD Outdoor Adventurous Activities	1.6
BA (Hons) Music Production (Top Up)	1.4
Foundation Degree in Social Care	1.2
BA (Hons) Fine Art With Design for Digital Media	1.1
FD Illustration	1.1
Graduate Certificate in Social Enterprise	0.9
BA (Hons) Music Production	0.6
FD Music Composition for Media	0.6
BA (Hons) Media Studies and Music Technology	0.6
Early Years Professional Status Short Extended Route	0.6
MA Public Service and Partnership Management	0.6
HND in Music Performance	0.6
Certificate in Substance Misuse: Early Interventions With Young People	0.5
FD in Music Performance	0.5
Early Years Professional Status Validation Route	0.5
FD Wine Business	0.3
BA (Hons) English and Music Technology	0.3
BA (Hons) Music With Music Marketing and Administration	0.3
FD Countryside Management	0.3
FD Equine Studies	0.3
FD Horticulture	0.3
BA (Hons) Business Studies and Music Technology	0.2
FD in Coaching Football	0.2
BA (Hons) English and Creative Writing and Music Technology	0.2
BA (Hons) Music With Design For Digital Media	0.2
FD Bioscience	0.2

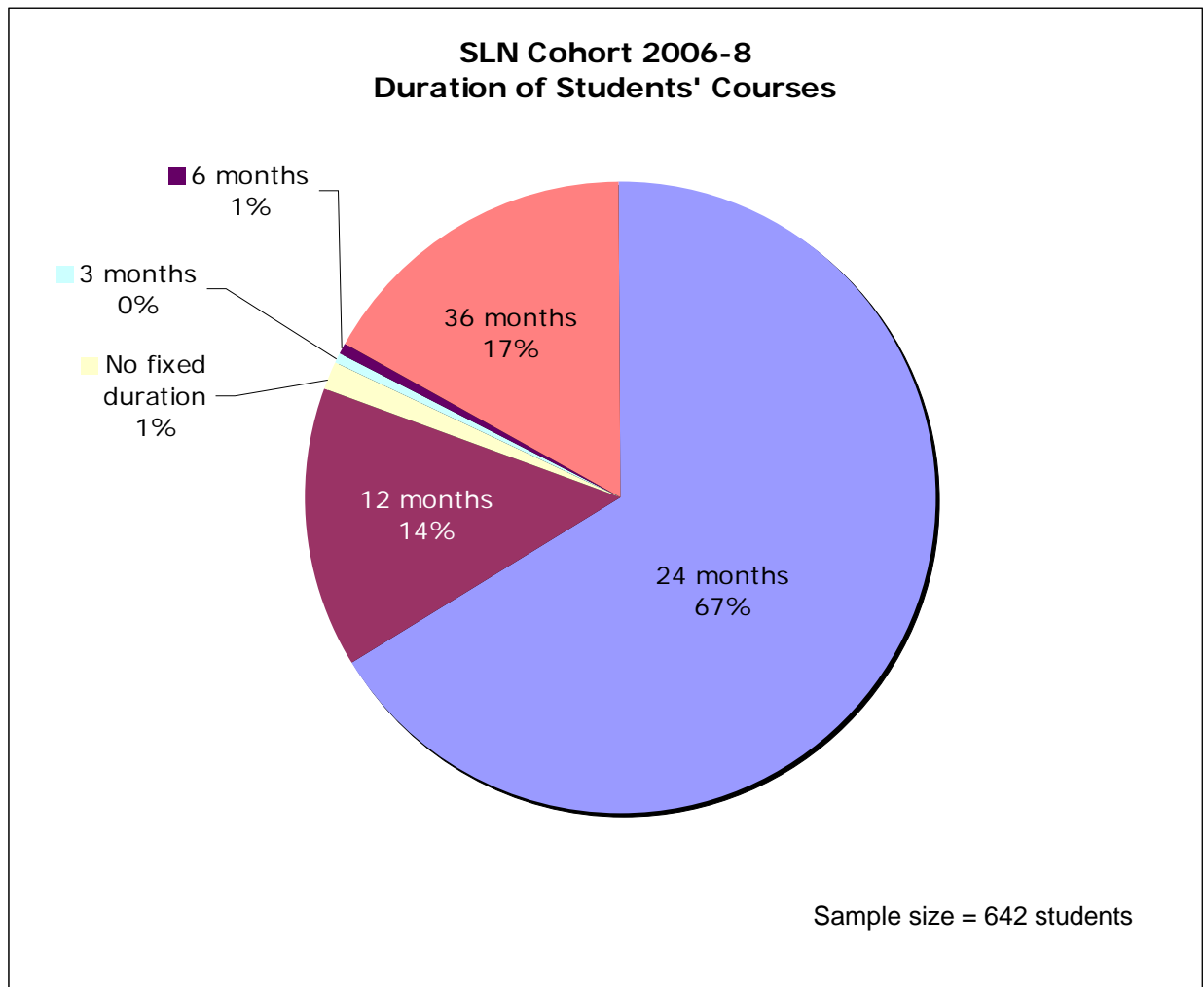
Graph 3.3 shows the proportion of the SLN cohort that was attending each course. The cohort is dominated by BIMM's FD Professional Musicianship students that form 27% of the cohort, 5 times more than the second ranked course. The graph shows the diversity of courses (46) attended by students in the SLN cohort. HEFCE FD data shows that nationally, Education, Business and Art & Design are the most popular FD subjects.

Graph 3.4



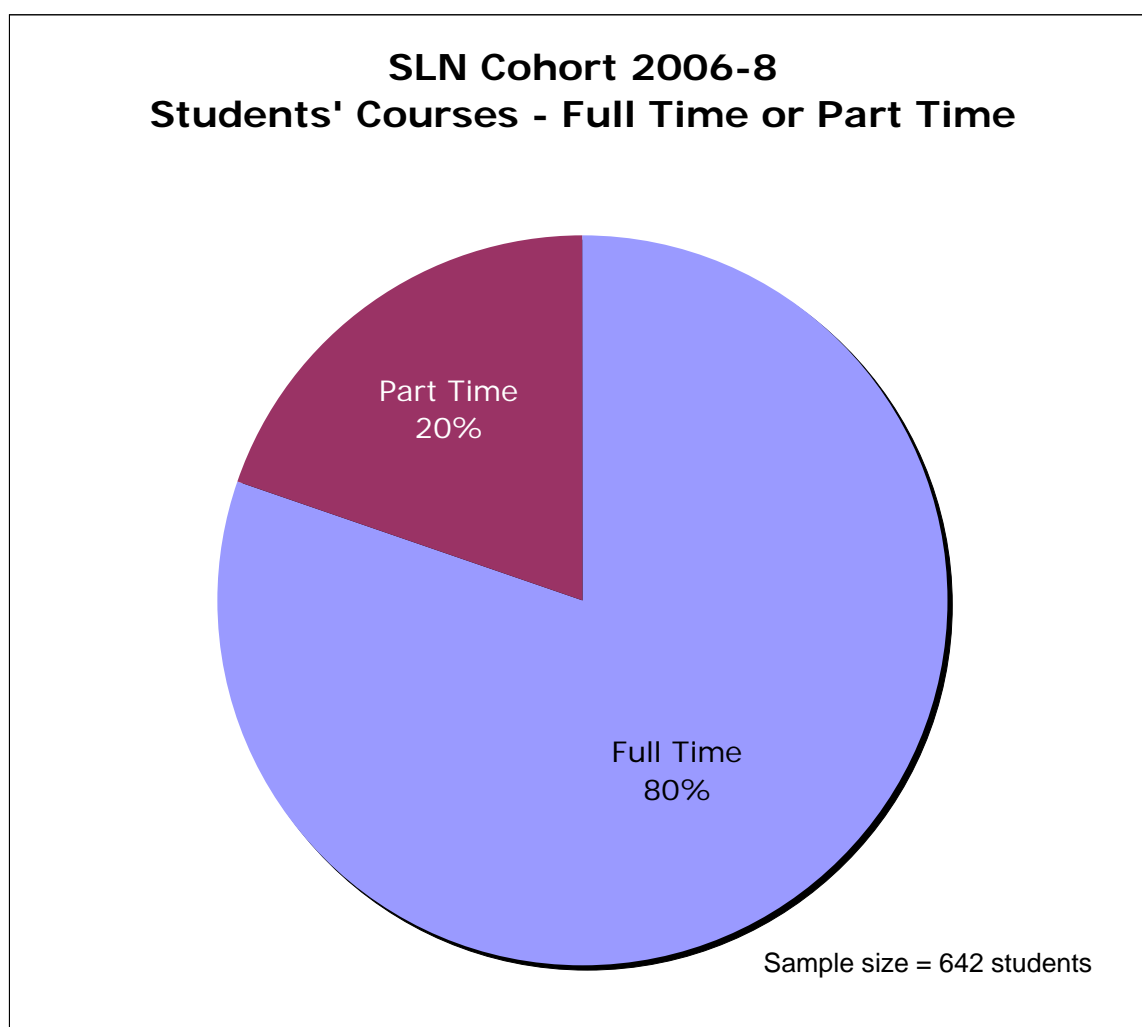
Graph 3.4 shows the percentage of students within the SLN cohort that were following the HESA defined qualification aims. This shows that 74% of the cohort is following a Foundation Degree course with 15% following a first degree. Various minor categories make up the remaining 11%.

Graph 3.5



Graph 3.5 shows the duration of courses followed by students in the SLN cohort. This shows that two thirds were following 2-year courses, 17% three-year courses (mainly BAs and BScs) and 14% one-year courses with very little other variation from these 3 main categories.

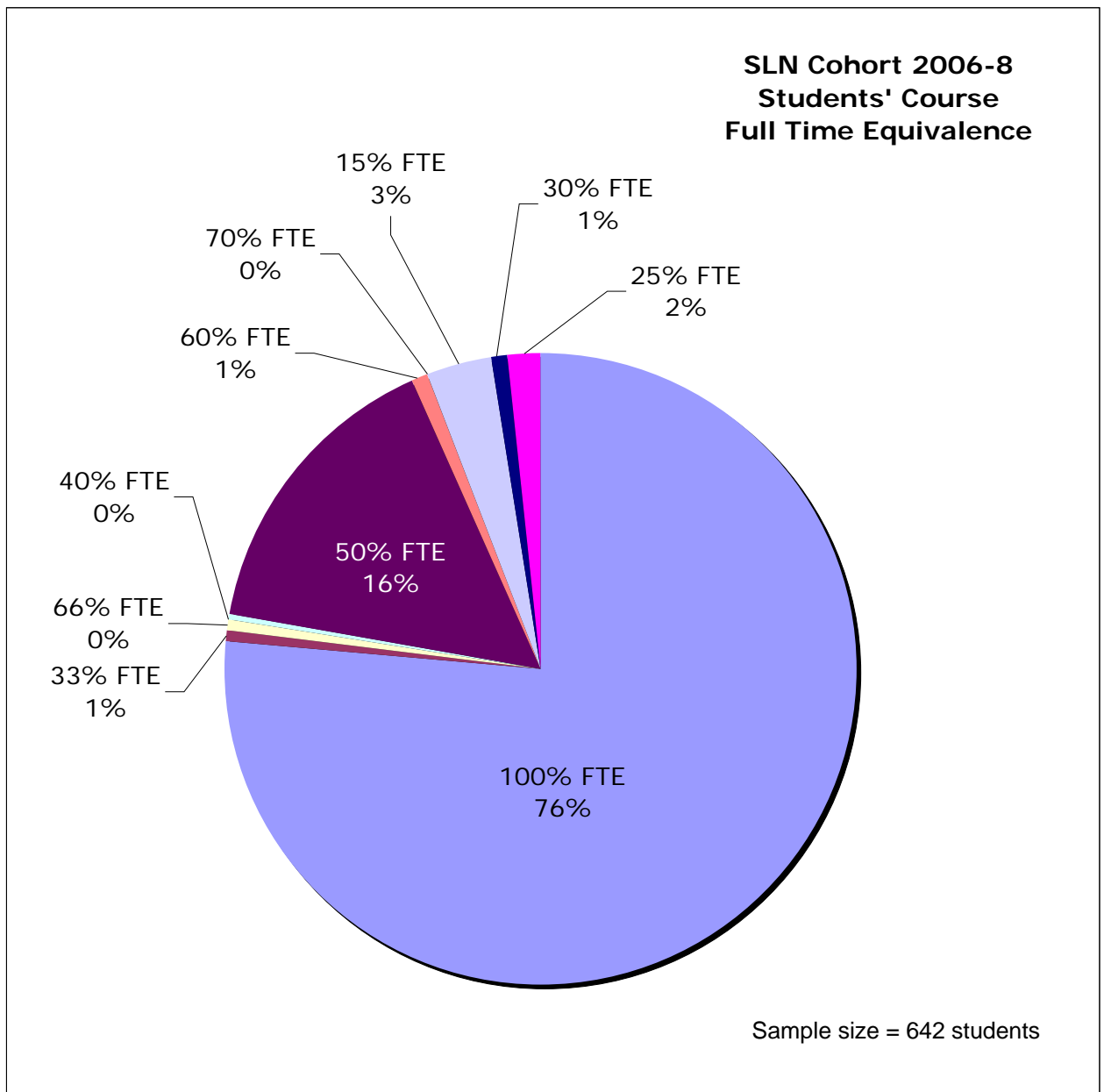
Graph 3.6



Graph 3.6 shows the proportion of the SLN cohort that was following full time as opposed to part time courses. Data collected from provider institutions shows that 72% of all students are full time and 28% are part time. Furthermore a comparison with national HESA foundation degree data for 2005/6 entrants shows that 62% of FD students were on full time courses.

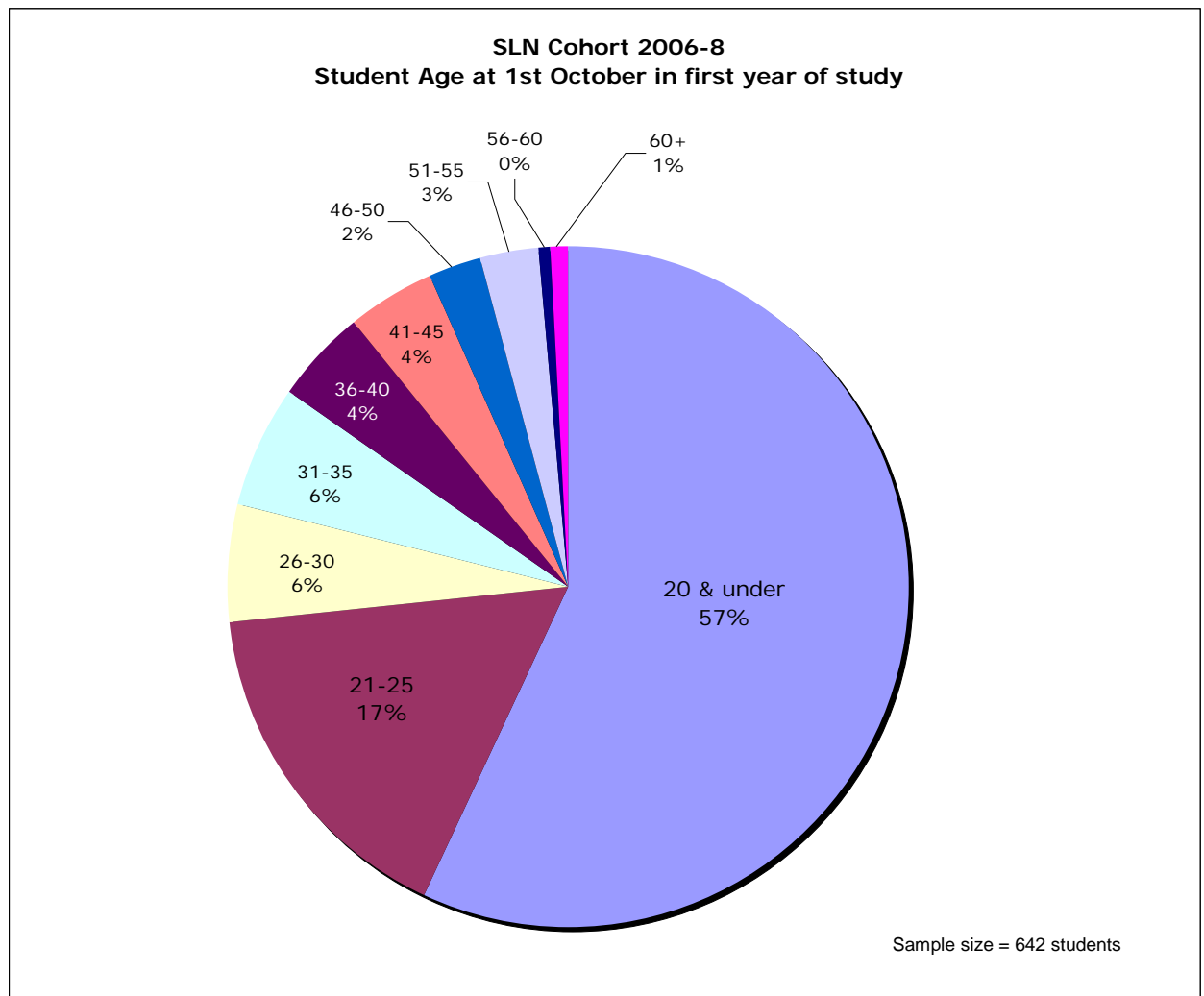
With only 20% of the SLN cohort on part time courses, this suggests that ASNs have not made a significant impact on opening up the capacity for and access to part time courses and that more work needs to be done to offer and promote part time courses that can be accessed by a wider range of learners. However, it must be remembered that the structure and attendance requirement of some full time courses can allow significant flexibility and work focus so generalisations regarding a correlation between inflexibility and full time courses can be misleading.

Graph 3.7



Graph 3.7 shows the percentage of full time study for SLN students. Full time equivalence (FTE) gives a more detailed measure of the length of the course rather than just simply full or part time. Full-time, full year students would normally be returned as 100% and part-time students returned as a proportion of an equivalent full-time course. 76% of the cohort was on 100% FTE courses. 16% of students were on 50% FTE courses. The remaining FTE percentages accounted for the remaining 8% of students with no one category accounting for more than 3% of the cohort. This shows relatively limited use of flexible delivery modes that fall outside standard 100% and 50% FTE, and suggests that there are opportunities for more creative use of flexible provision that might attract learners from a wider student constituency.

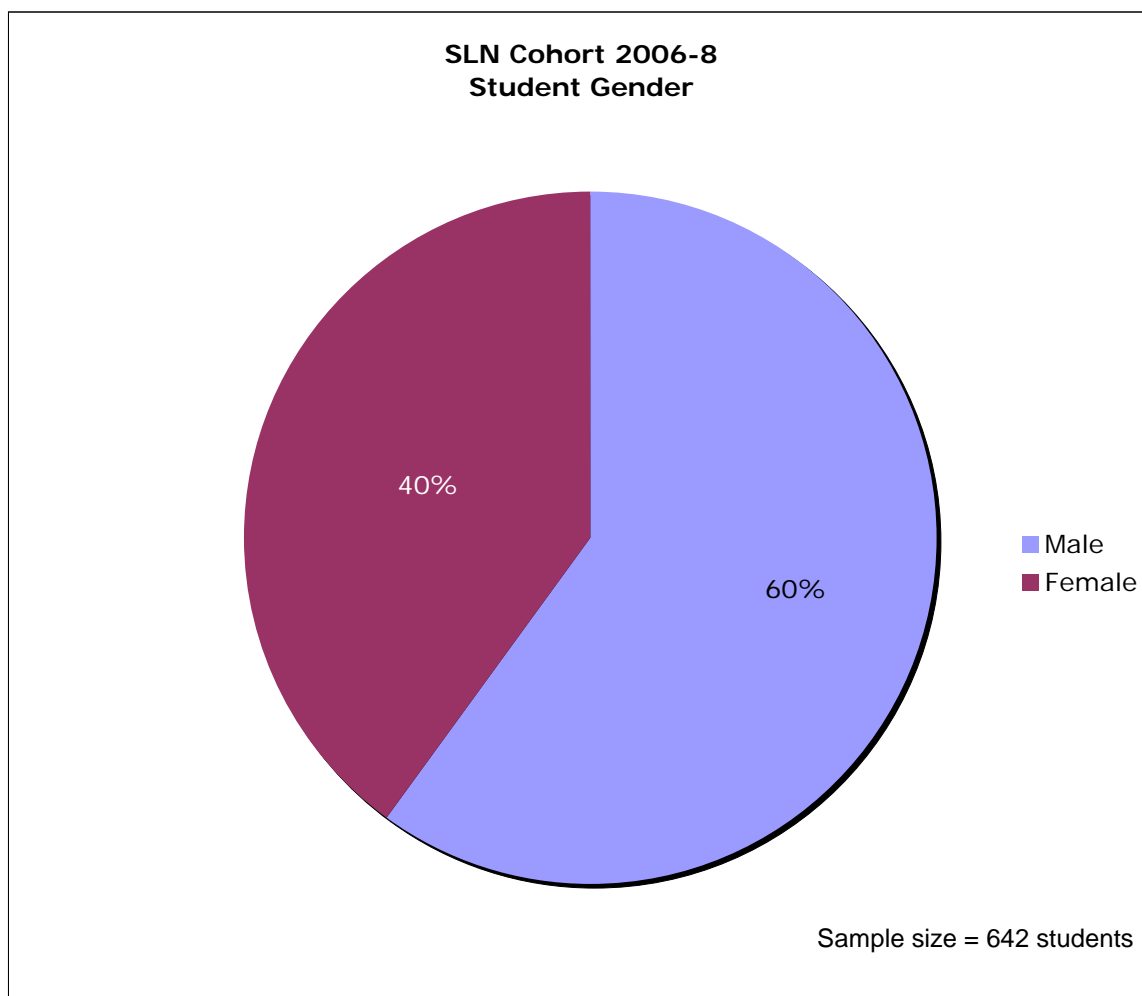
Graph 3.8



Graph 3.8 shows the age split for the SLN cohort. This shows that a significant proportion of the students (26%) are aged over 25, which suggests reasonable penetration into non-traditional student age groups.

National HEFCE foundation degree data for entrants to the 2005/6 year shows that 65% of foundation degree students were aged 21 or over. The SLN cohort comparative figure shows that only 43% of students were aged 21 and over. This implies that there is more to be done to reach national benchmarks on age diversity. This may well link with the point made relating to graph 3.1.6 where it was clear that there were fewer part time courses being followed by the SLN cohort. Mature learners tend, for a number of reasons, to be more attracted to part time courses.

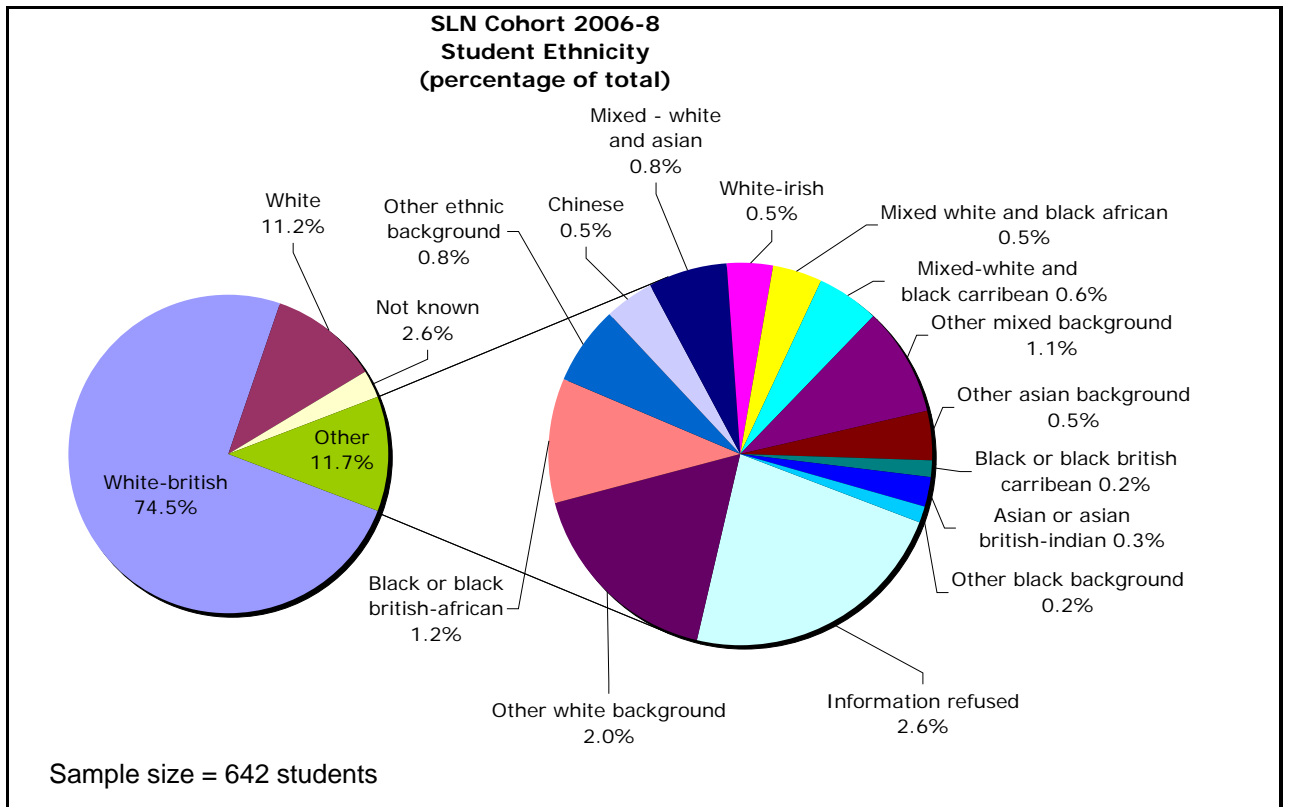
Graph 3.9



Graph 3.9 shows the gender split which indicates a fairly even split across gender lines. Traditionally there is a very close relationship between course type and gender, which can skew this type of data. At the very least this shows that there is no significant gender bias across the whole SLN cohort.

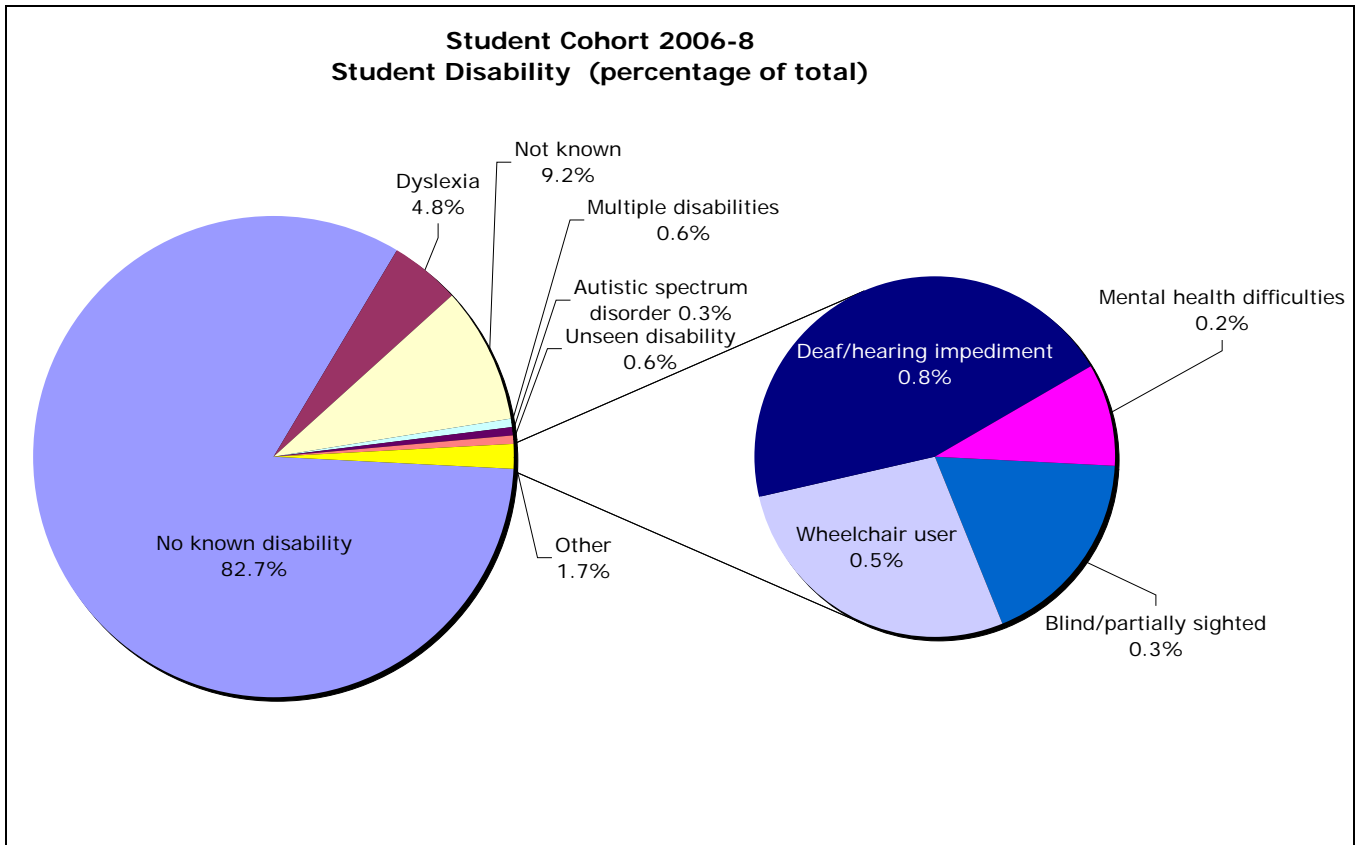
National HEFCE FD data for 2005/6 entrants shows that 57% of students were female, a reverse of the SLN cohort where only 40% are female. However, HEFCE figures show that over half of the FD students were studying Education, Business or Art and Design, some of which may be subjects with a traditional female bias.

Graph 3.10



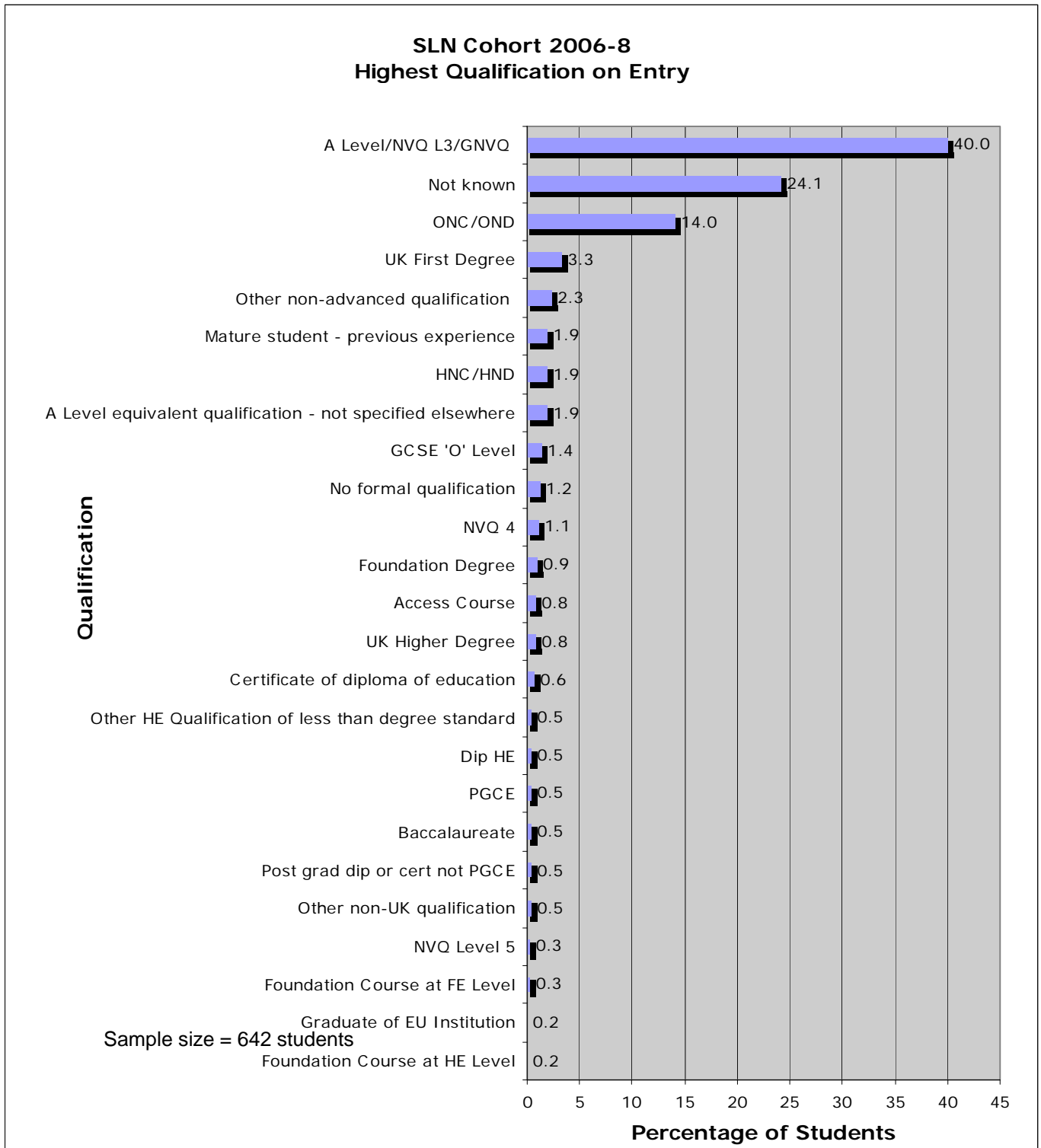
Graph 3.10 shows the ethnic breakdown of students in the SLN cohort. Taking the 'white' and 'white british' categories together they account for 86% of students with 9% of students outside of these categories with the rest unknown or refusing to give information. This suggests that the majority of students are drawn from the indigenous population. The proportion of ethnic students at 9% compares favourably against a backdrop of a black and minority ethnic population of just 3.4% across Sussex (source: 2001 Census).

Graph 3.11



Graph 3.11 shows the percentage of the SLN cohort students that have been recorded as having a disability. 83% have no disability, while for 9% the information is not known. Dyslexia accounts for nearly 5% of students with remaining 3% comprising a range of other disability categories.

Graph 3.12

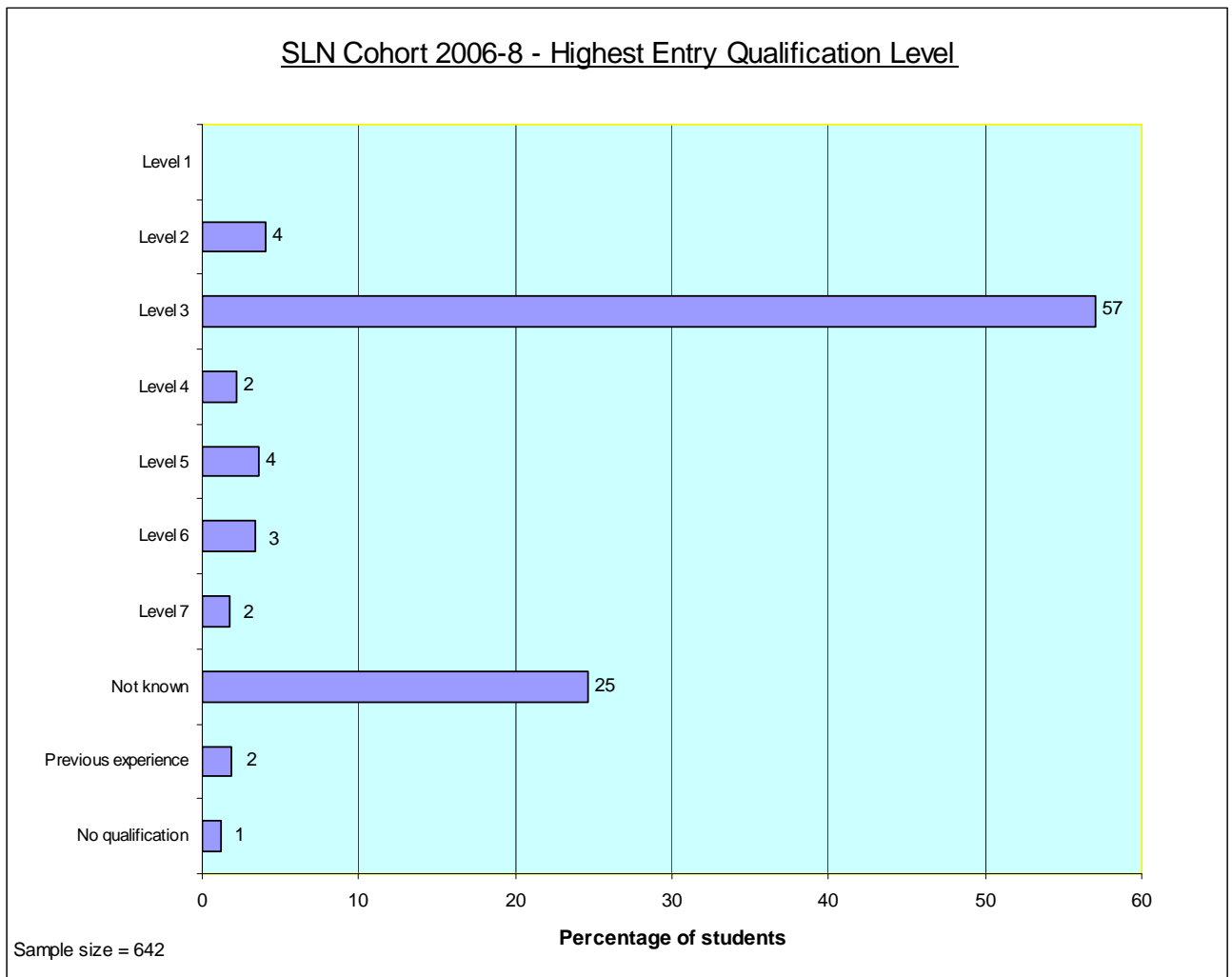


Graph 3.12 shows the highest qualification held by students on entry to their current course. 40% of students in the SLN cohort had achieved 'A' level, NVQ 3 or GNVQ on entry, with a further 24% not known. The next highest category was ONC/OND at 14%. All other categories were less than 3.5% of the cohort with a diverse range of previous qualifications from higher degrees to GCSE 'O' Levels to no formal qualifications at all. This shows that some students are

entering their courses with low or no previous academic attainment but that this still forms a minor proportion of the SLN cohort.

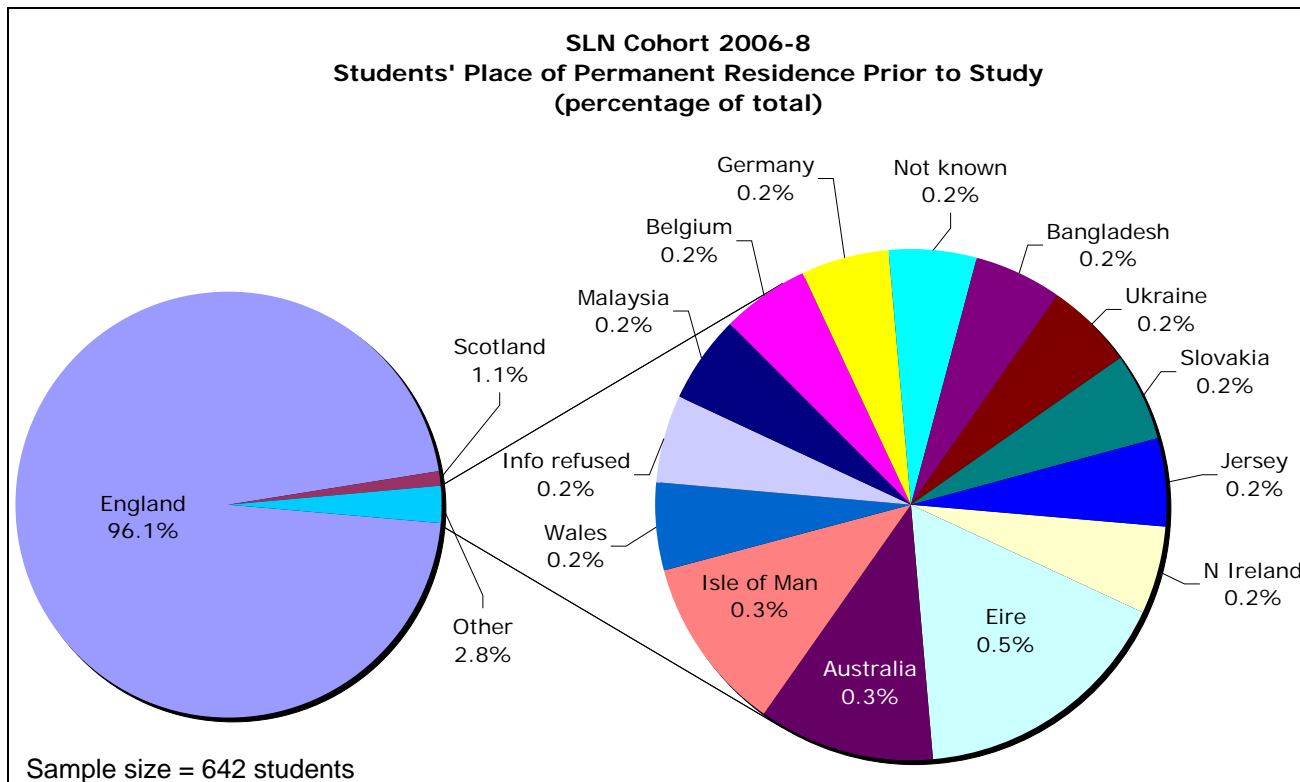
Nationally, HEFCE FD data for 2005/6 entrants estimates that 11-33% of entrants had 'A' levels. The SLN cohort figure of 40% is close to the upper end of this, and includes NVQ 3 attainment which cannot be disaggregated from the HESA data.

Graph 3.13



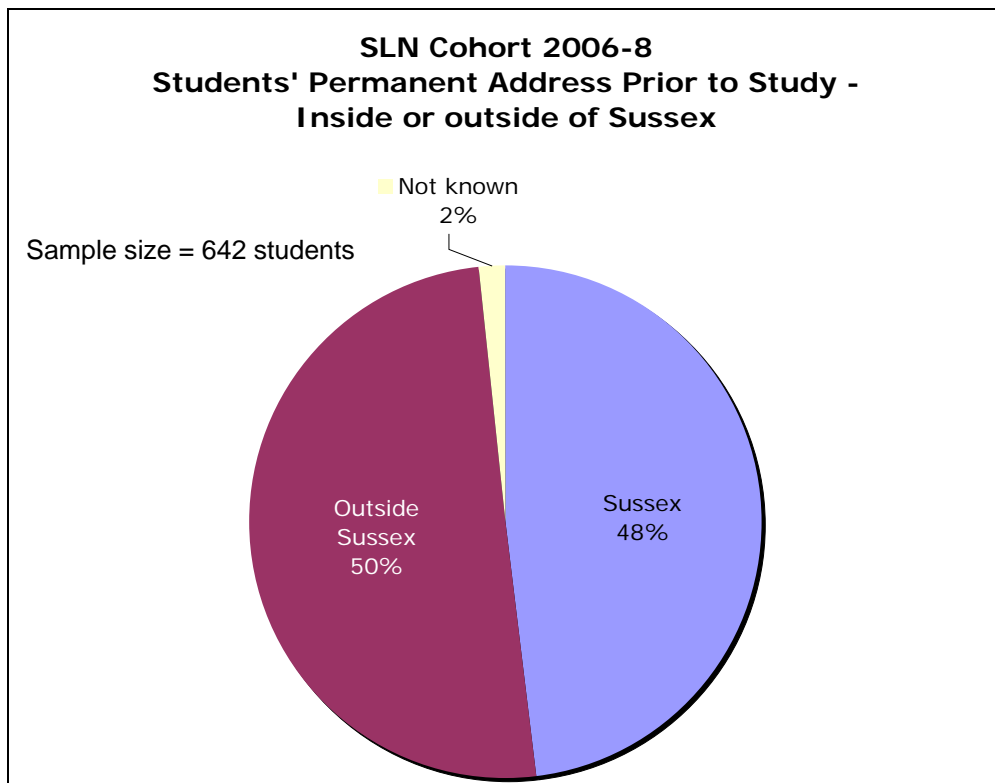
Graph 3.13 shows data on highest entry qualifications by level of qualification achieved. This aggregates the data shown in graph 3.2.5 into prior levels of qualification attainment and reaffirms that predominance of students having achieved a level 3 (as would be expected on entry to higher education) as opposed to those with no or below level 3 attainment (5%). The absence of data for 25% of the cohort means that this data must be interpreted with care and it might be surmised that students not declaring a previous qualification would be less likely to be those with a traditional level 3 qualifications – but there is no sound evidence to support this.

Graph 3.14



Graph 3.14 shows students' place of permanent residence prior to starting the course. This shows that there were only a small percentage of students whose permanent residence was outside England prior to study, which would be expected given the SLN's aim to make local provision available to local people.

Graph 3.15



Graph 3.15 shows that nearly half of the students in the cohort were living in Sussex prior to entry to the course – a significant proportion are therefore local students, thus supporting the view that the SLN and providers have been successful in opening up access to local students. A further 10% of the cohort was drawn from the neighbouring counties of Hampshire, Surrey and Kent.

4. On-Line Survey Results

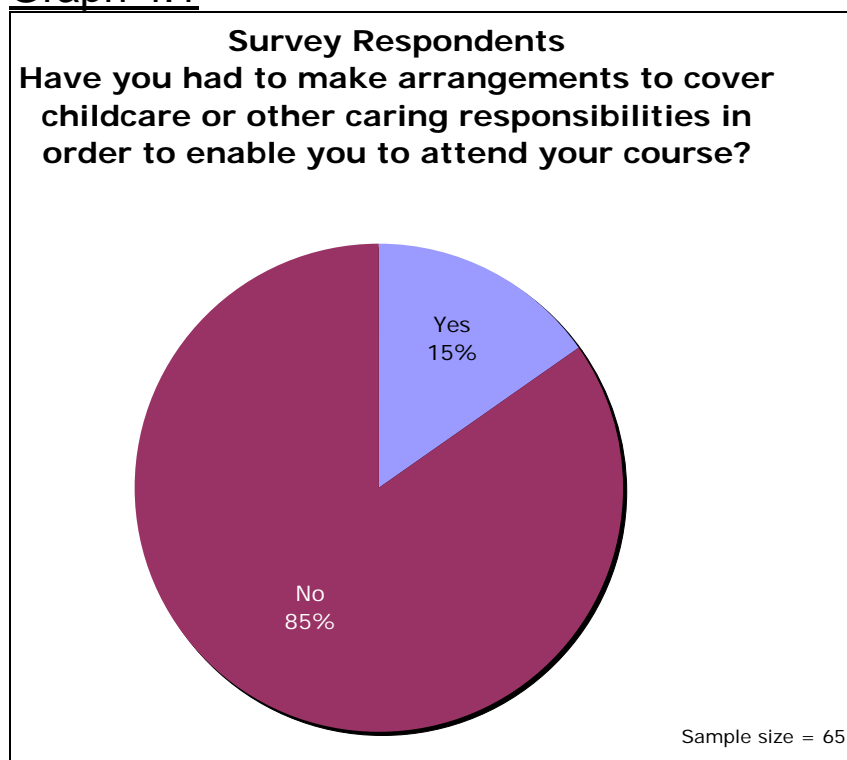
As described in section 2, an on-line survey request was sent via provider institutions to all students on courses that had SLN cohort participants. 96 unique responses were received, with 65 of these being students in the SLN learner cohort representing 10% of the total SLN cohort of 642 students.

It was important to establish whether this 10% of respondents were broadly similar in their characteristics in comparison with the total SLN cohort before drawing conclusions from the responses. A series of graphs at Appendix 4 show a visual comparison of the characteristics of the SLN cohort and the respondent cohort. These graphs show that in broad terms the survey respondent cohort is a reliable mirror of the total SLN cohort.

By their nature, the graphs at Appendix 4 also show a breakdown of the specific characteristics of the survey respondent cohort.

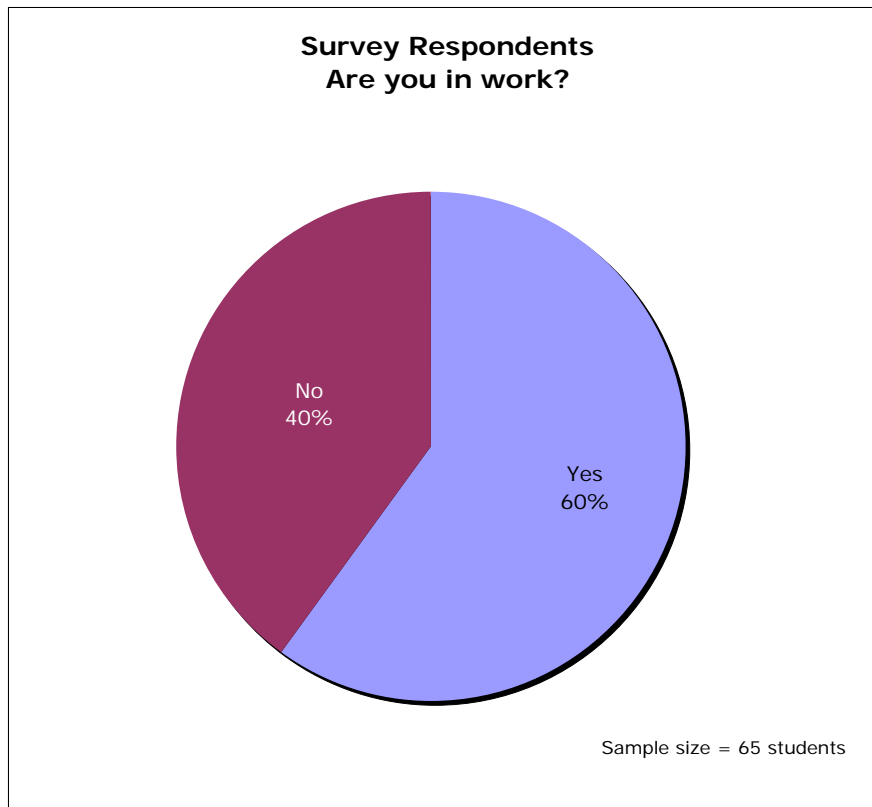
The following graphs illustrate the key findings of the survey.

Graph 4.1



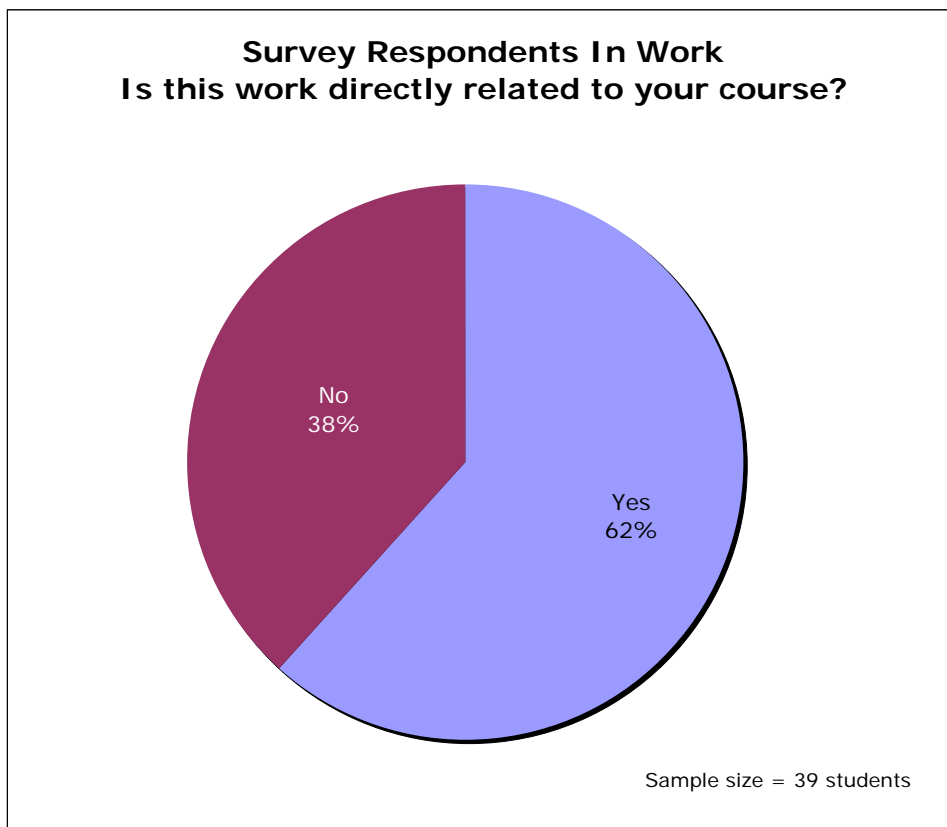
Graph 4.1 shows that a significant minority of students responding to the survey reported needing to make arrangements for childcare or other caring responsibilities in order to be able to undertake their course. Of the 10 (15%) of students that had made caring arrangements 3 of these were on full time courses and 7 on part time courses. Of the same 10 students making caring arrangements 8 were working (3 were working more than 35 hours a week, 3 between 15 and 35 hours and 2 up to 15 hours) and in roles relevant to their course. Only 1 student was working full time while on a full time course reflecting the difficulty of making dual commitments to work and study while also having caring responsibilities. These figures suggest the need for sufficient part time provision to offer options for those who are working and/or have caring responsibilities.

Graph 4.2



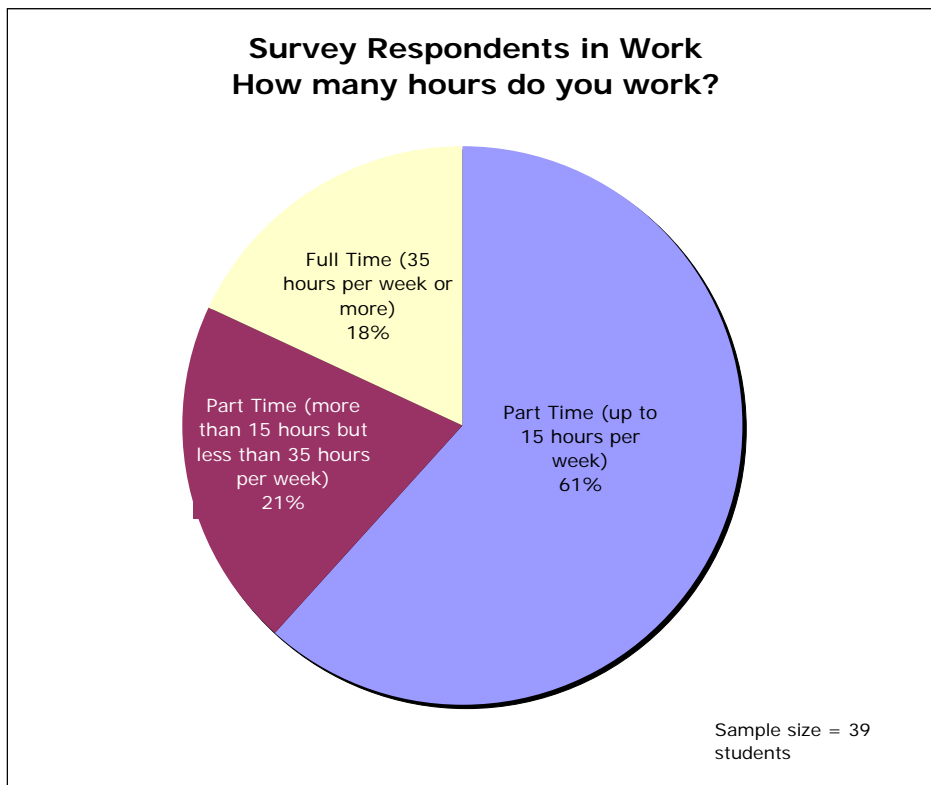
Graph 4.2 shows that the majority of students were in work. The following graphs show whether this work was related to their course and the number of hours of work undertaken.

Graph 4.3



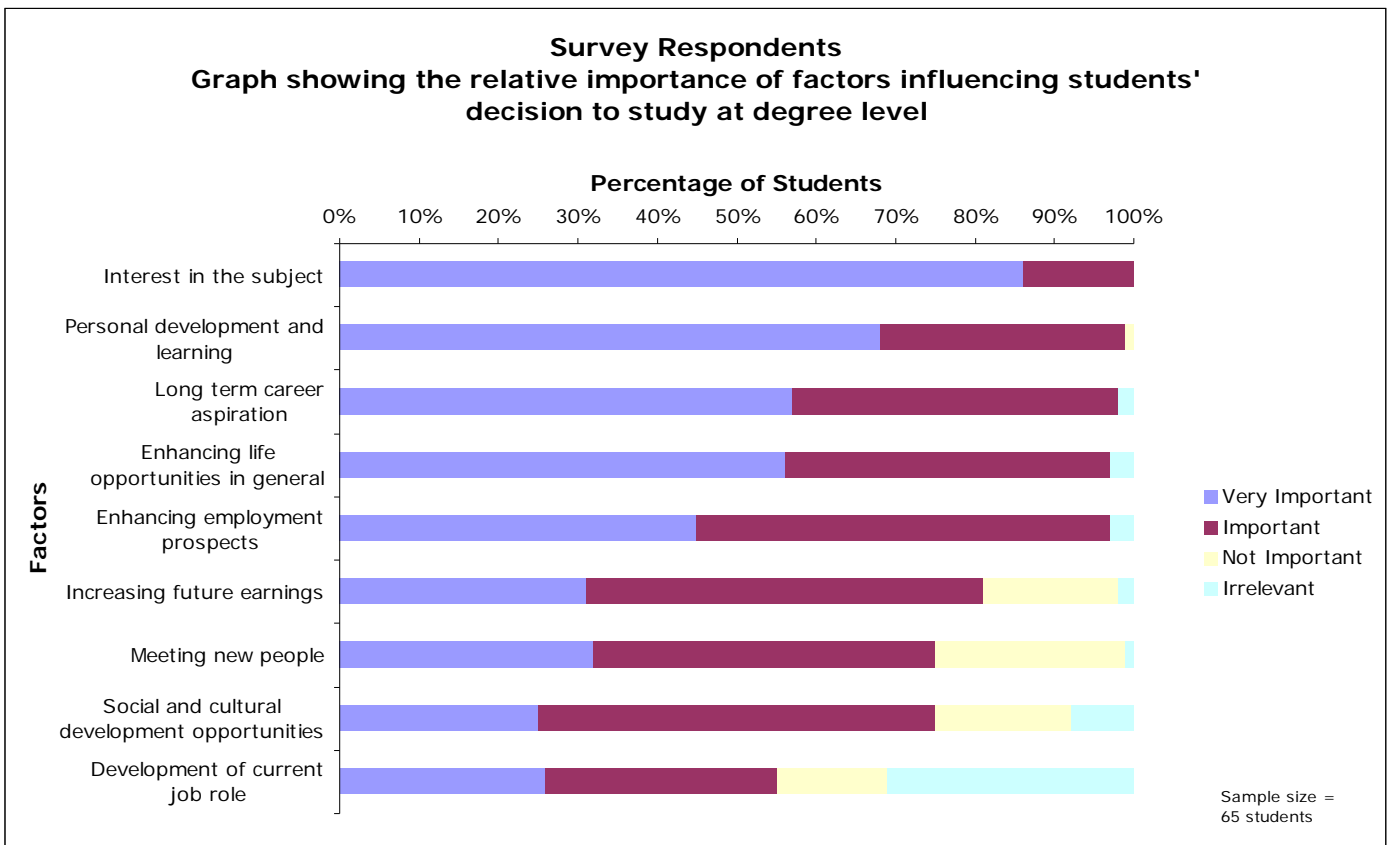
Graph 4.3 shows that of the students that said that they were working 62% were carrying out work that was related to their course. This emphasises the success of the SLN in supporting provision that is appropriate for learners in the workplace.

Graph 4.4



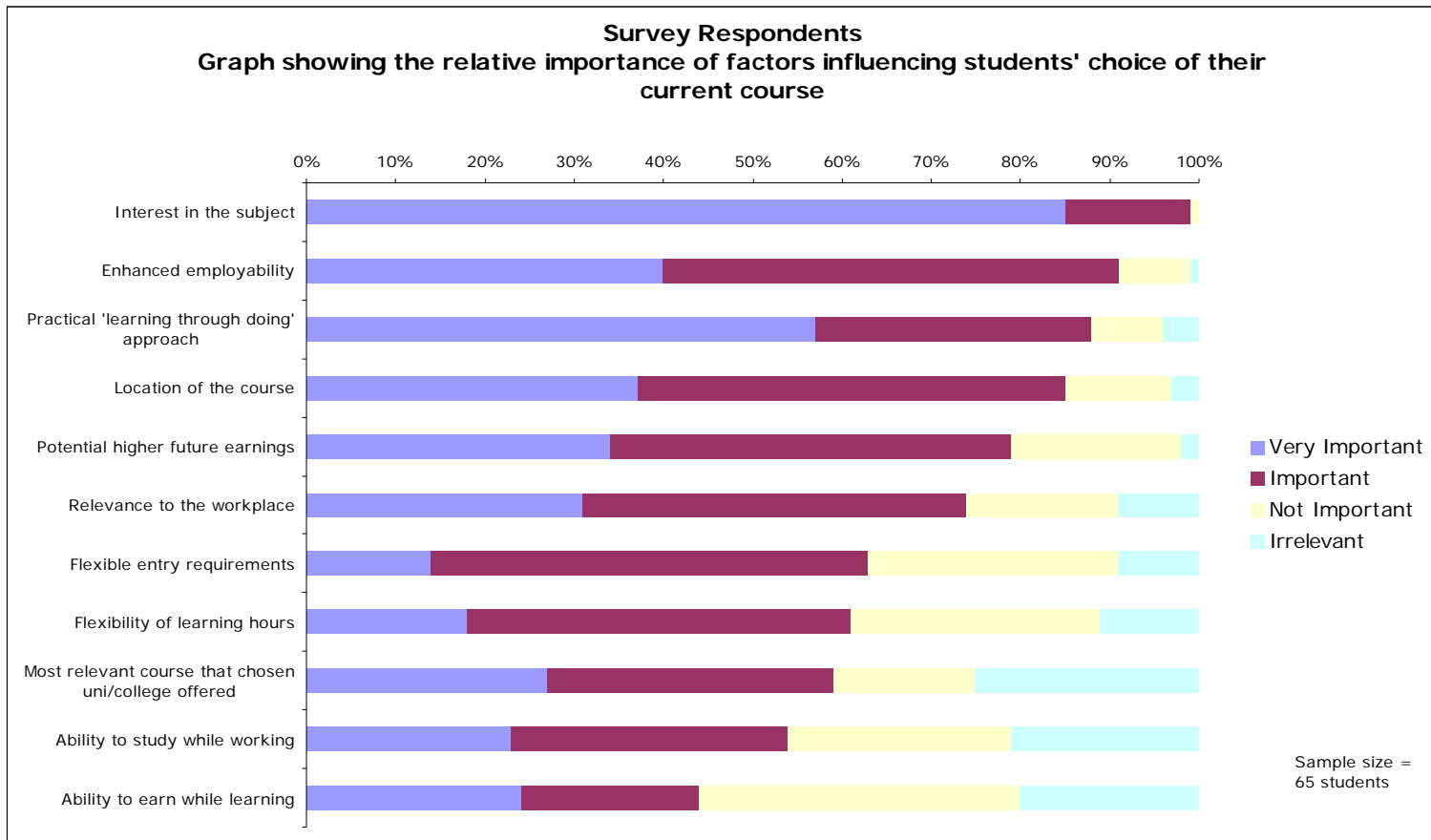
Graph 4.4 shows that of the students that said they were in work 61% were working less than 15 hours per week while the remainder were working longer hours with 18% working more than 35 hours per week, i.e. working full time. This shows some level of success in that the flexibility of course delivery enables participation by full time workers.

Graph 4.5



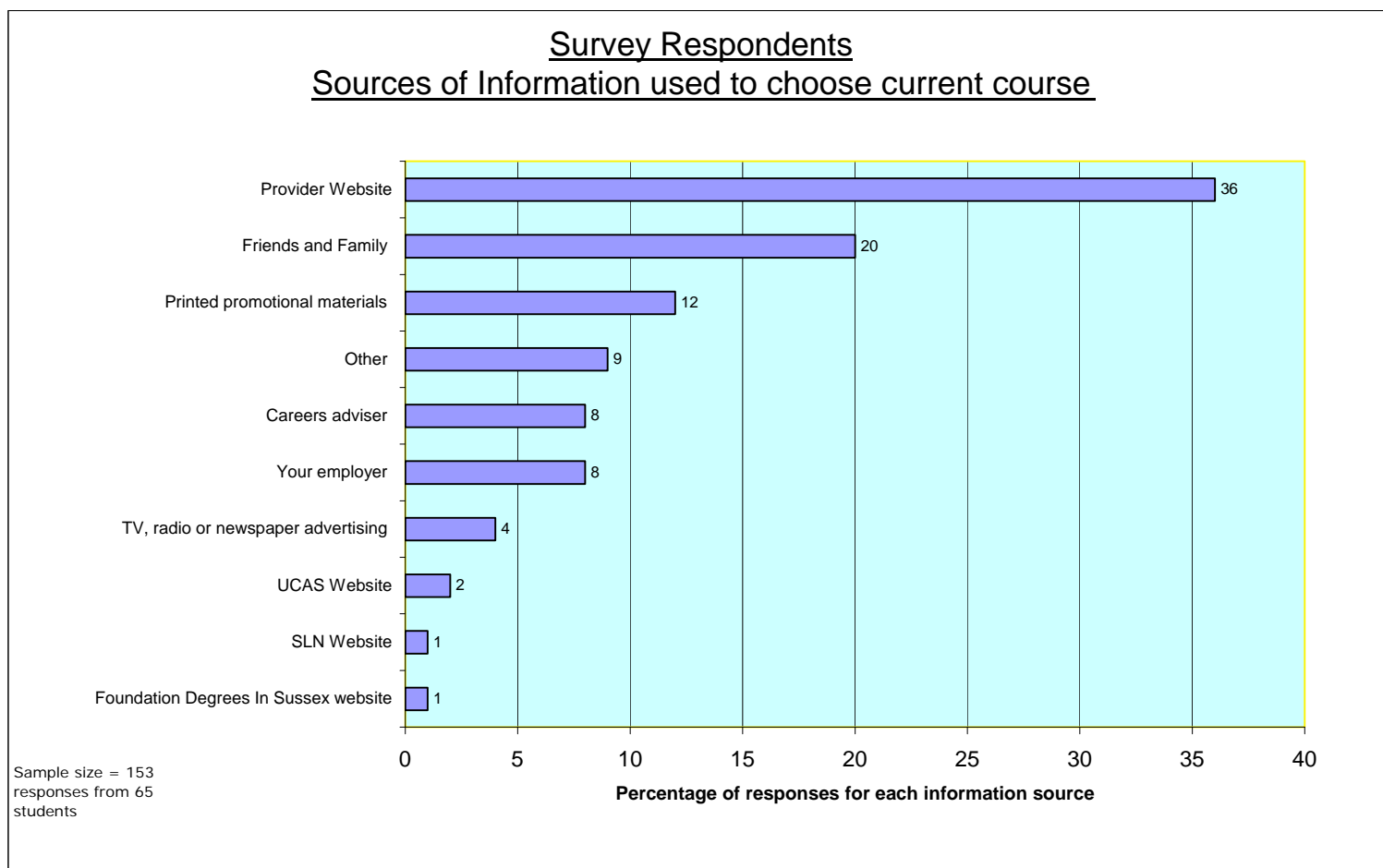
Graph 4.5 shows that the decision to study at degree level is based on factors such as interest in the subject, personal development, long-term career aspiration, enhancing life opportunities and employment prospects. Social factors scored less highly as did the development of the current job role, which reflects the fact that many students were either not working, or not working in roles related to their course. It is interesting that although students were keen to enhance employment prospects, the desire to increase future earnings was not rated as so important.

Graph 4.6



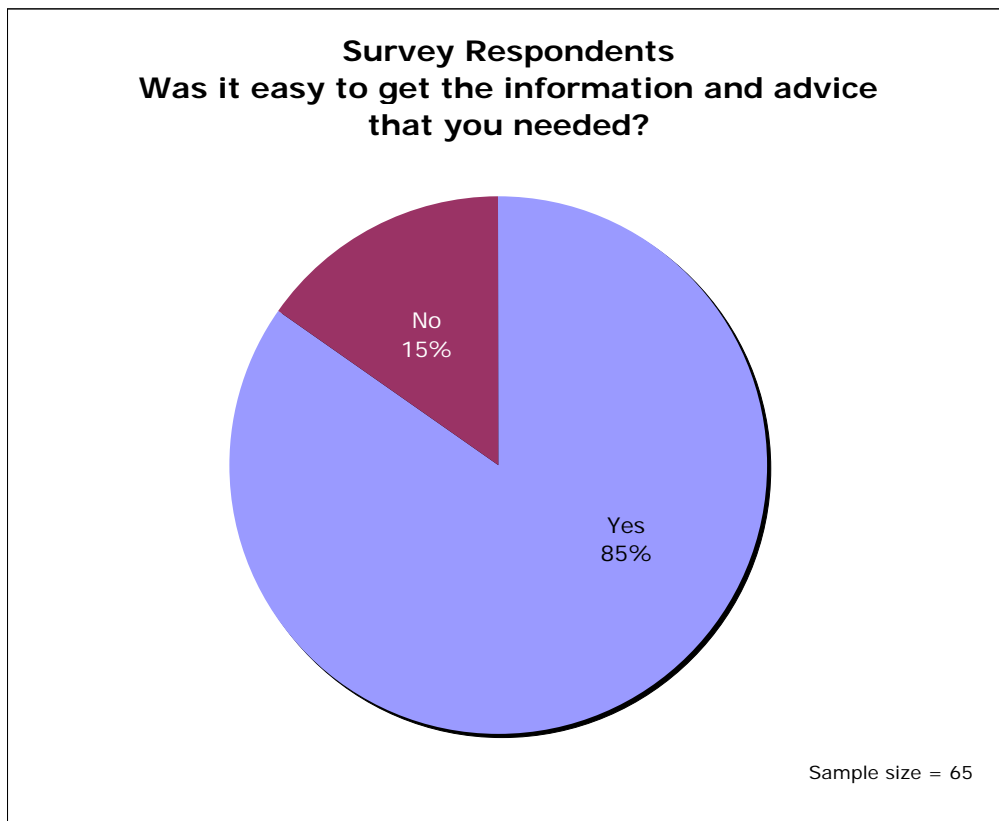
Graph 4.6 sees the practical nature of the courses followed by the SLN students showing through. Enhanced employability and a practical approach to learning score highly as reasons for choosing their courses as well as the obvious interest in the subject. Course location is ranked fourth and perhaps reflects that fact that nearly half the SLN cohort live in Sussex. Perhaps more surprising are the lower scores for flexibility in terms of entry requirements, learning hours, and the general ability to be able to work while studying and earn while learning. However, while not ranking the latter highly, the results shown in graph 4.2 indicated that a significant proportion of respondents were in work.

Graph 4.7



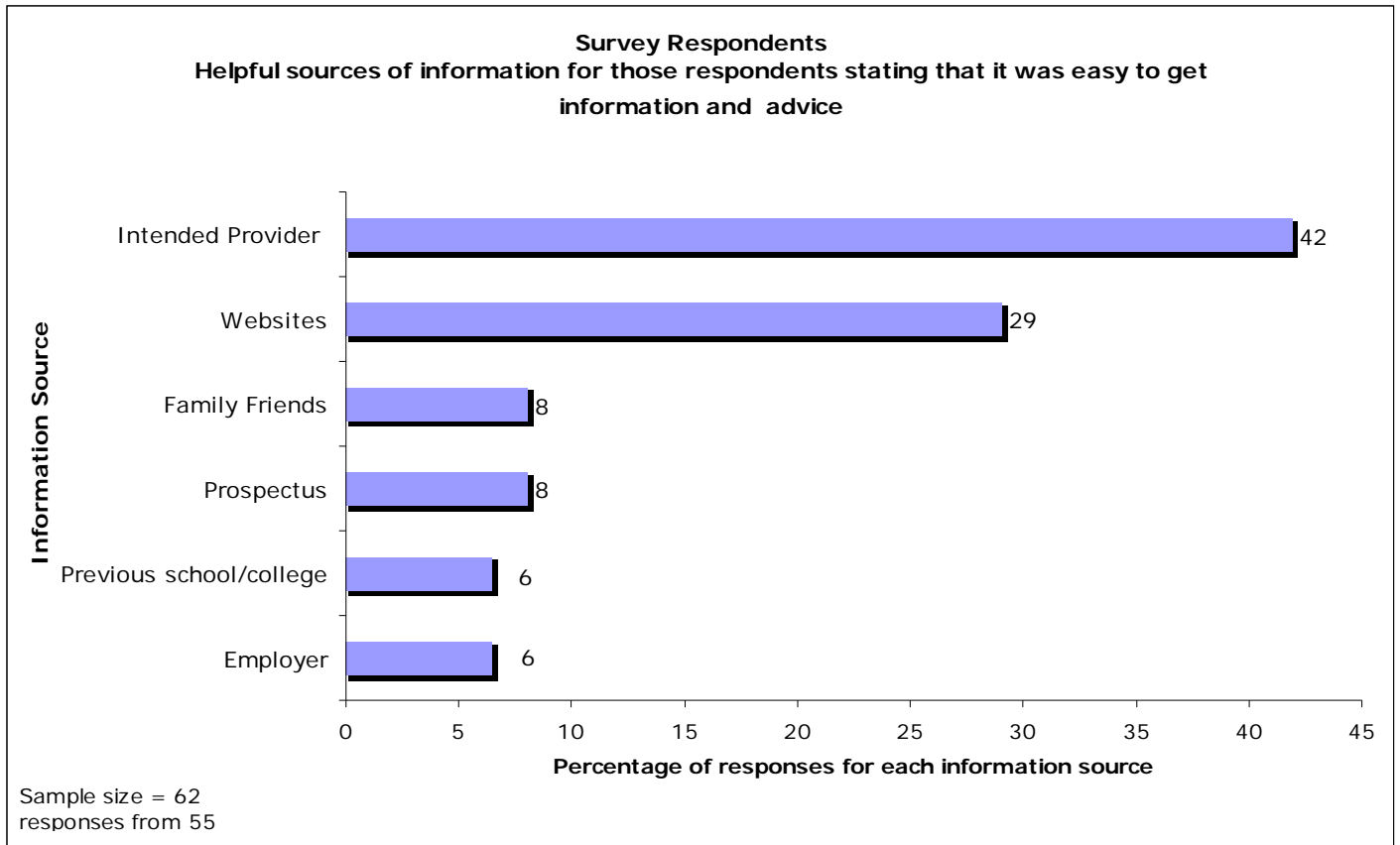
Graph 4.7 gives a picture of the sources of information used to make the choice to follow the current course. Provider websites are the most commonly used source, then friends and family and printed promotional material. The lack of impact of the other listed sources, especially the SLN and FDIS websites suggests that more promotional work might be necessary although the 2006/7 entry cohort pre-date the launch of these sites.

Graph 4.8



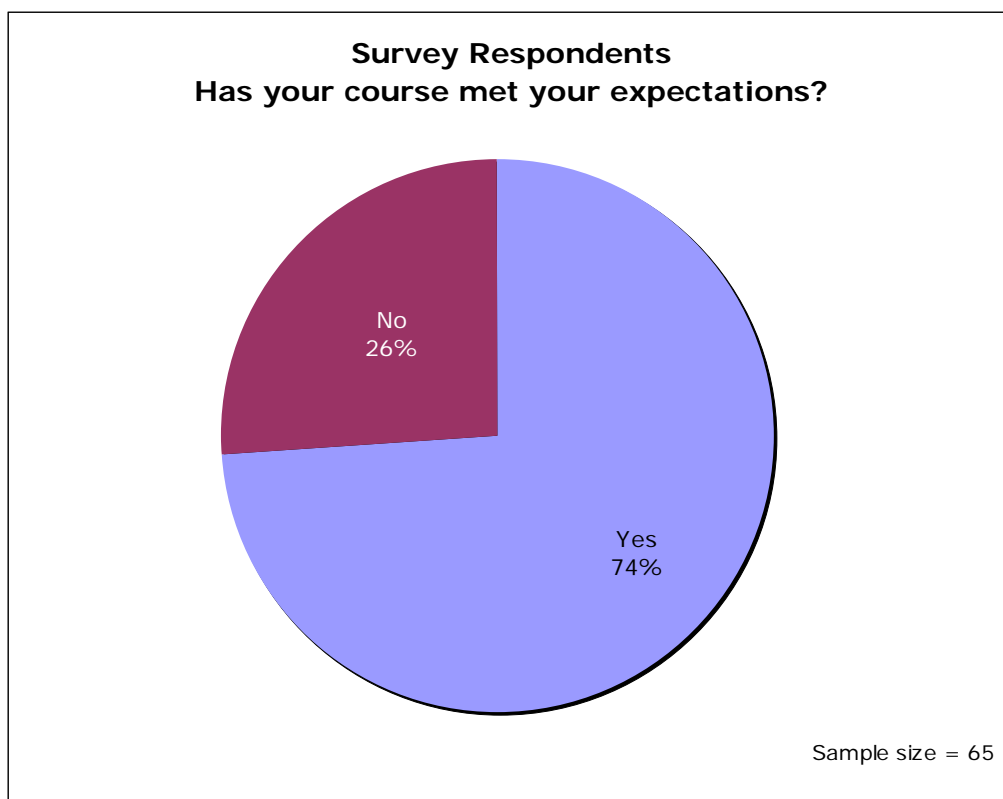
Graph 4.8 shows that there is a high level of satisfaction relating to the ease of which information needed on courses could be accessed.

Graph 4.9



Graph 4.9 shows the sources of information used by those respondents who said that they had found it easy to access the information and advice that they needed. The importance of the information given by the chosen provider of the course is clear with 42% directly quoting this and 29% using websites which we know from graph 4.7 are primarily those of providers. Those respondents who said they did not find it easy to get the information did not give a reason why.

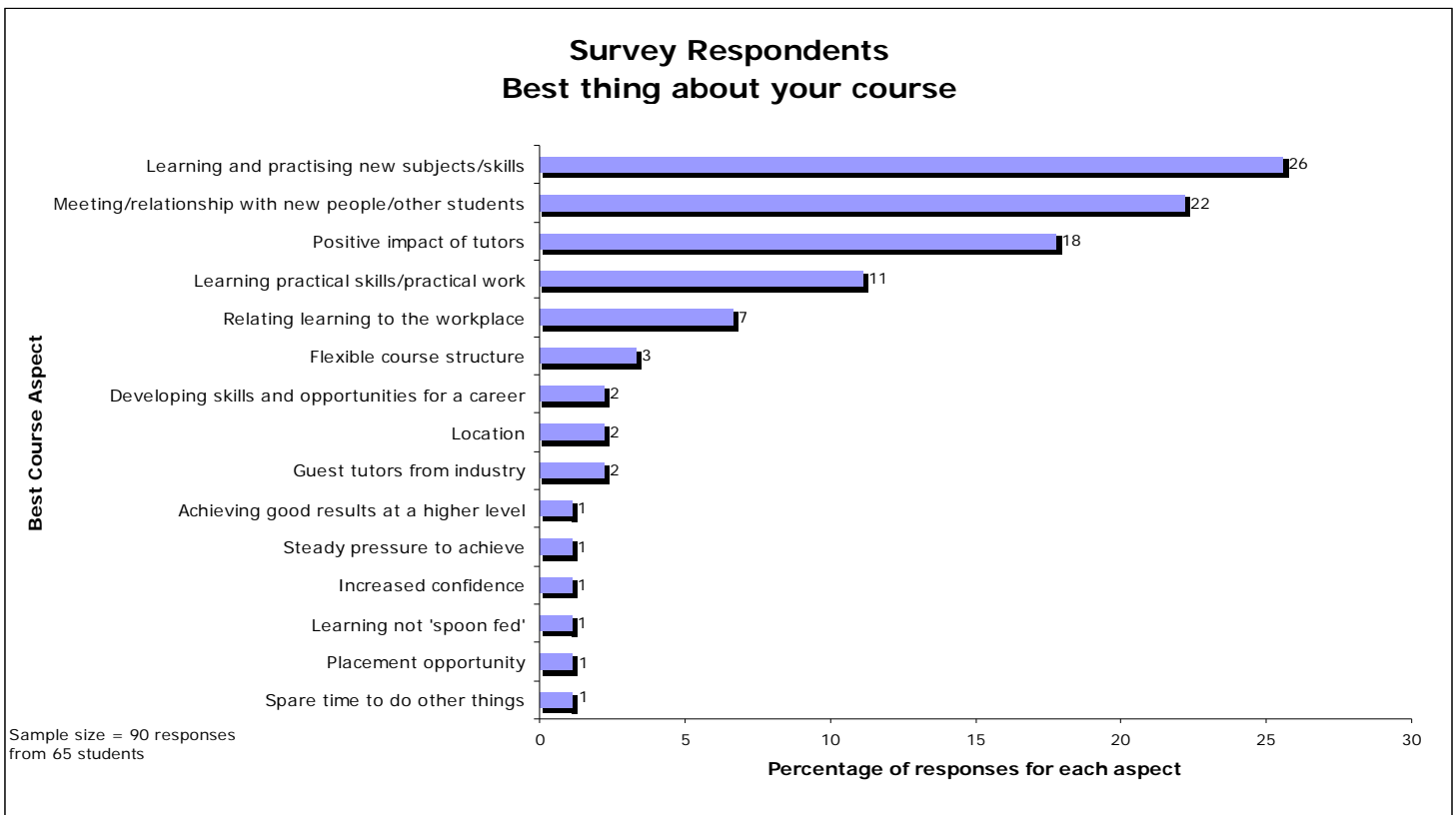
Graph 4.10



Graph 4.10 shows that nearly three quarters of respondents said that their course had met their expectations. The detail behind this information is explored in the following graphs.

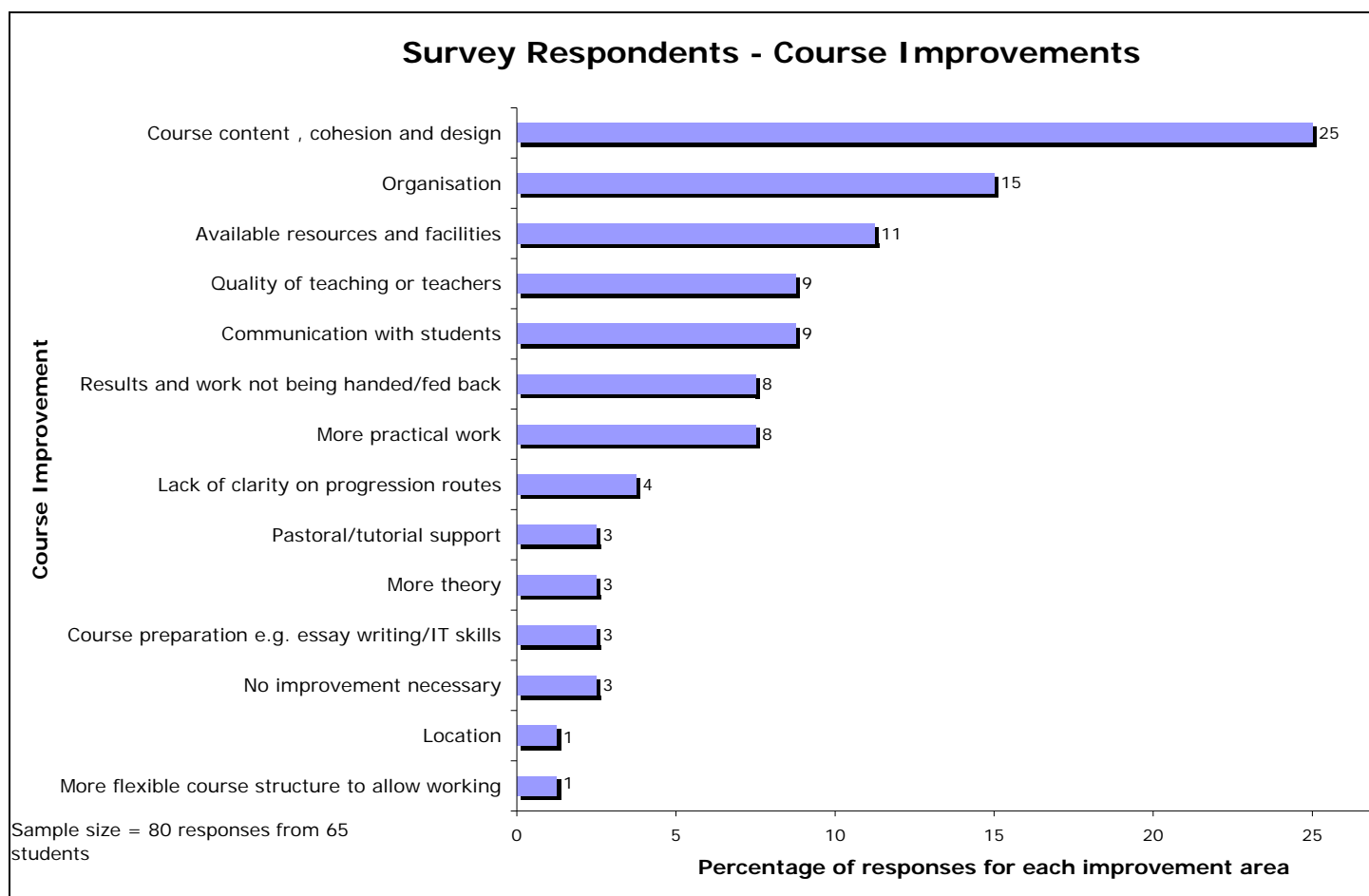
Nationally, HEFCE FD data from the National Student Survey showed that 76% of students were 'satisfied with the quality of their course'. Although this is a slightly different statement this is broadly comparable with the figure above.

Graph 4.11



Graph 4.11 The enthusiasm for the practical work involved in many of the courses is illustrated in these free text responses and underlines the results of the closed questions reflected in graph 4.6, showing the reasons for choosing the course. The responses above also show that the positive 'people' aspects of the course in relation to tutors and fellow students are some of the highlights – this correlates with the fact shown in graph 4.5 that nearly 80% of students regarded the social aspects as an important factor in choosing to study at HE level. This suggests that it would be beneficial to stress the practical and 'people' aspects of courses in marketing and IAG materials.

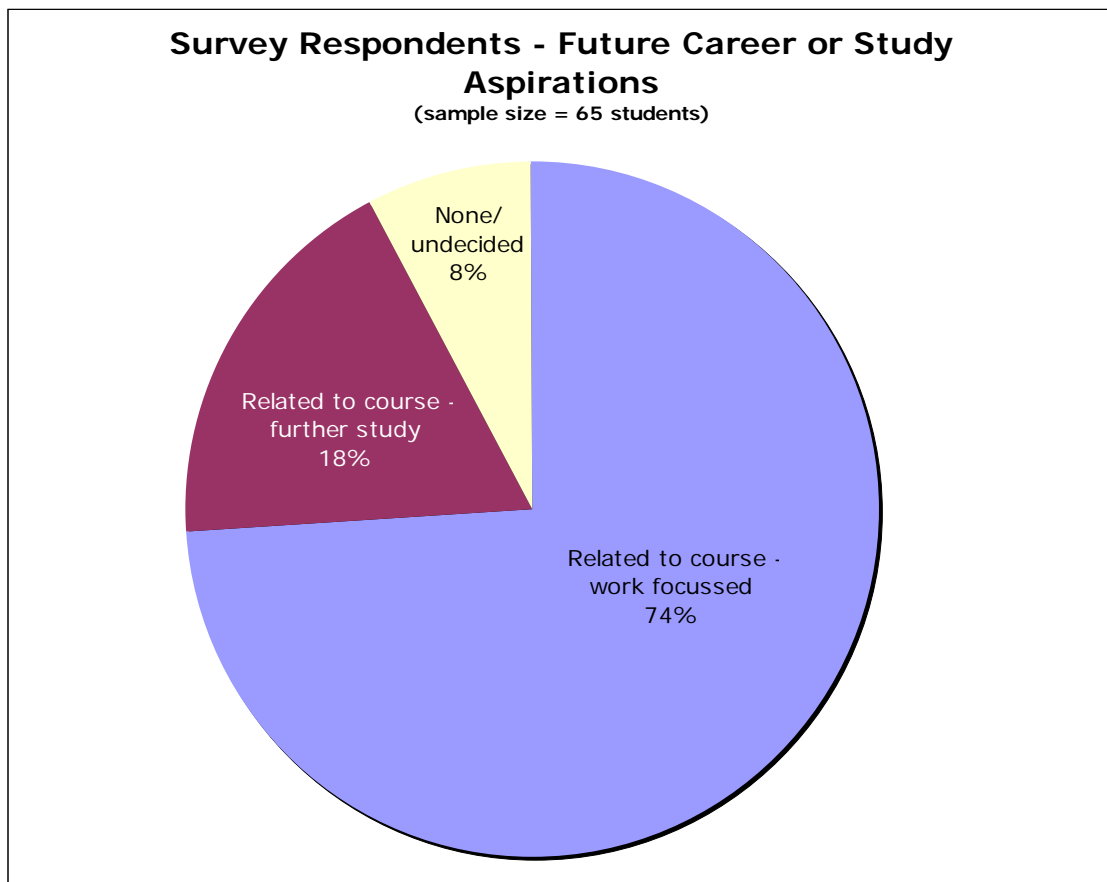
Graph 4.12



Graph 4.12 These free text answers that have been categorised by the researcher show a student concern with 4 major issues: course design (could be content, logistics, assessment etc); organisation; availability of or access to resources, and the quality of teaching. More detail relating to these issues emerged from the interview and focus group phase, found in Section 5 of this report.

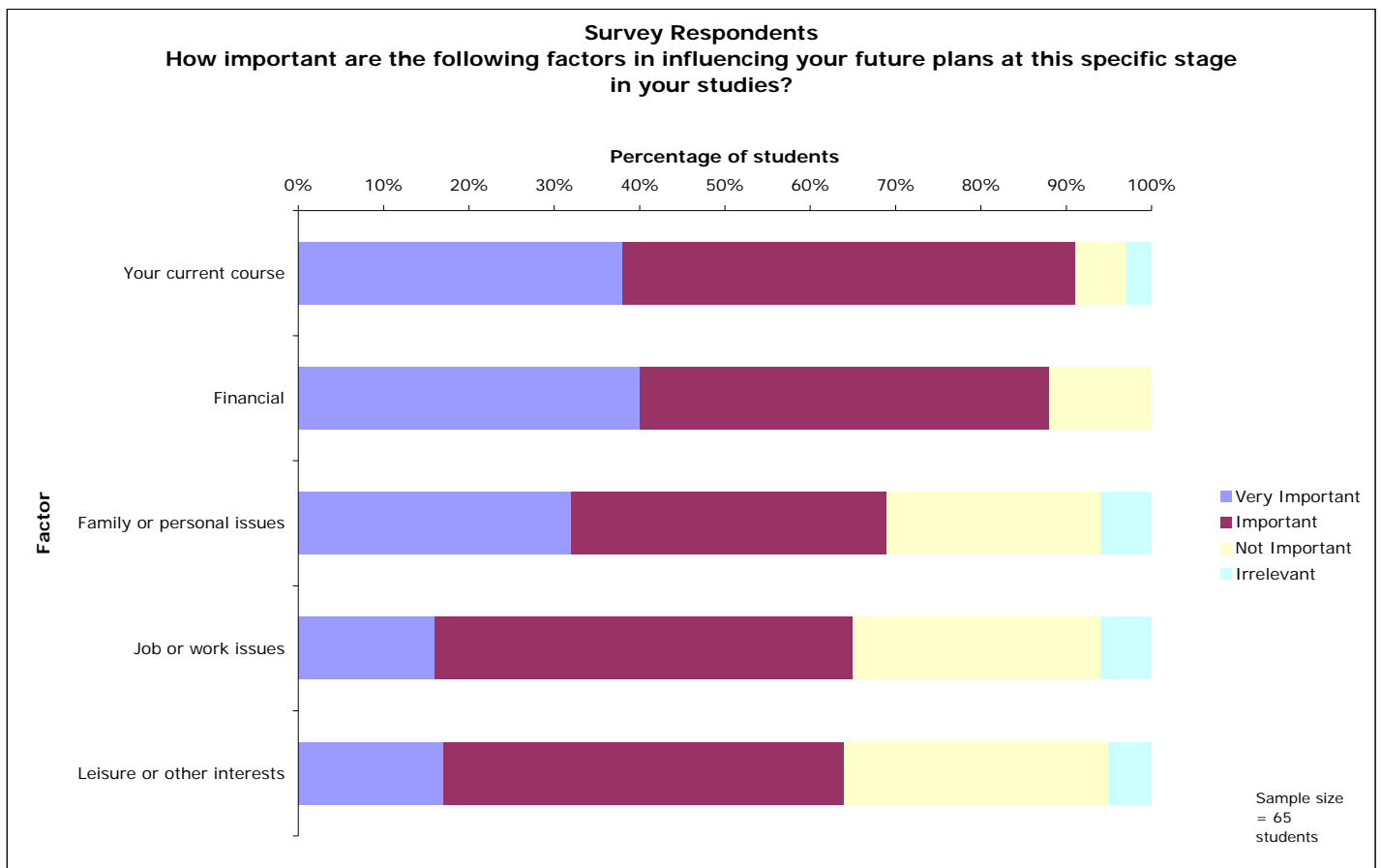
National HEFCE FD data from the National Student Survey showed that only 56% of students thought that their course was well organised and running smoothly. Whilst the levels of concern about these issues locally were not as high, the national findings support the view, with many of the factors above relating to course organisation, that this is a significant issue.

Graph 4.13



Graph 4.13 underlines the vocational focus of the SLN cohort in relation to their future aspiration related to their area of study. 74% of respondents had the aspiration to work in an area relating to their course with a further 18% wanting to continue to study in that area.

Graph 4.14



Graph 4.14 shows the strong influence of the current course on future plans and emphasises the relevance and appropriateness of students' course choice. Financial issues are rated as important here and are more prominent than in answers to previous questions.

5. Key Points Arising From Interviews and Focus Groups

Five face-to-face interviews, five telephone interviews and two focus groups took place, as detailed in Section 2.

The main findings are detailed below and illustrated by extracts from the researcher's interview and focus group summaries:

5.1 Student Background and profile

- 5.1.1. The profile of students interviewed underlines the diverse backgrounds that appear to characterise the SLN learner cohort. There were older people who were working full time and studying, younger people progressing from 'A' levels immediately onto vocational courses, those motivated by career change, others motivated by work related legislation. Some were locally based prior to their course, others had moved from their home base. Some students had significant family or caring responsibilities, others did not. It was very clear that within a sample of 10 students there was a range of ages, circumstances, life stages, responsibilities, motivations and aspirations. Some of these characteristics can be gleaned from the graphical information in section 4 but the interviews gave an opportunity to gain a real understanding of each person's background, circumstances and perspective. This diversity would suggest that the SLN is having some success in attracting a broad range of learners to vocational higher education.

5.2 Choosing what to study and pre-course experience

- 5.2.1. Perhaps the clearest finding arising from the interviews and focus groups was that none of the students undertaking a foundation degree had chosen to do their course *because* it was a foundation degree. This supports the findings of the Papworth Report in that students had been most likely to choose a subject area, or in some cases a location, then identify provider institutions. The provider then drew their attention to the availability of the foundation degree usually at initial interview.

What was surprising was that S didn't hear about the foundation degree option until he had arrived at his chosen university. He then described himself as 'stumbling across' the right course for him and that this was 'a complete accident'.

- 5.2.2. In some cases there was clear evidence of the benefits of the foundation degree being explained (by the provider institution) to the student as a basis for a course choice being made.

S says that it was clearly his tutor at the university who influenced him to go for the foundation degree route as a number of powerful features were explained to him such as 'getting two degrees for the price of one'; still getting a degree if he failed or decided not to do his BSc; an academic/vocational mix of learning.

5.2.3. In many other cases students currently undertaking a foundation degree still could not explain the features and benefits of this type of course.

When asked if she was attracted to the course because it was a foundation degree, S was clear that this was not a factor as she still wasn't clear as to the key characteristics of a foundation degree.

There were no such issues on honours degree courses or other professional courses where student choices had been clear and targeted on particular qualifications.

5.2.4. Furthermore, the confusion identified in the Papworth Report regarding the term 'foundation' was present again with students confusing a foundation year in art with a foundation degree. Indeed, two Fine Art foundation degree students remained confused about the difference between the two courses and one had stated on her on-line survey that she had previously completed a foundation degree when in fact she had completed an art foundation year.

5.2.5. The term 'foundation' also led students to perceive the foundation degree as an introductory or lower level qualification without intrinsic worth.

M was very clear that most people she speaks to do not regard a foundation degree as a full qualification – the word 'foundation' implying that the qualification is a starting point, a stepping stone towards another goal.

5.2.6 The interviews underlined that despite the best efforts of IAG agencies, many course choices were often haphazard, fatalistic and left to chance. Last minute decisions, decisions purely based on moving to a specific town and decisions based on chance meetings with friends all featured in determining the final course choice. For most it was not the exact and considered process that would perhaps be imagined by training and education professionals.

At the end of his gap year C had left it late to use the normal channels of application for a university place. He just googled his local university and saw that they offered the degree that he wanted and 'phoned them to ask for a place on the course.

5.2.7 Where course choices were driven by clear criteria these were more likely to be about subject choice, location or work requirements driven by government legislation. A number of interviewees had chosen to live locally to their provider institution either due to caring responsibilities, financial savings and/or convenience of travel. However, most students in these circumstances said that they would have travelled further away to find the right course if necessary.

5.2.8. While it is clear that the information provided by the provider institution has a significant impact on the course choice of the individual (see graph 4.9) it is also clear that some students were not satisfied with the quality of pre-course information. This led to later surprises when there were unexpected changes to course content, assessment methods or locations.

L felt that there was a need for improved communication before the start of the course; students were given the name of a textbook that would be used for one of the course modules. L made the effort to read this only to find that the tutor then used a different book as the key text for the module. She found this frustrating.

Another student reported that he had just discovered that the third year of his course would be located in another town 15 miles away.

- 5.2.9. Some students also questioned whether enough initial assessment had taken place to really establish whether the course was right for them. Although flexible entry requirements were generally welcomed there was an issue for some about whether sufficient support had been made available to enable a less academic student to cope with the theoretical and written aspects of the course. A small number of interviewees reported that this had been a problem for them while still more reported this as a perceived issue for other students on their course. For working students, a related issue was whether or not the students' work role was sufficiently senior to support the course content. One student, who at the time of the interview had just been told that she had not passed her course, was clear that her lack of authority in her workplace was at the heart of her reason for failure. This suggests that initial assessment processes need to be improved.

M felt that initial assessment issues had led to poor student retention on his course; he thought that some students had struggled with the level of academic work required and that these students were in fairly junior roles in their workplaces

5.3 On-Course Experience

- 5.3.1. Nearly all students reported satisfaction and enthusiasm for the practical nature of their course. There was a real sense that although the interviewees were not fully aware of the design characteristics of vocational HE courses there was no doubt that they were recognising the benefits of these characteristics as part of their own experience. In broad terms, and in most cases, those students who would respond to a vocational HE course had managed to find their way onto one.

L says of her course 'I love its diversity'; she says that her enjoyment increases as the amount of practical work increases, as a practical learning-through-doing approach is important to her. She feels that the practical experience is really important to her prospects of gaining employment after the course.

- 5.3.2 There were good examples of provider institutions recognising the circumstances of groups of students. One provider gave extra support to working students in accessing library materials. However, there were also examples of where this hadn't been achieved and students had to be flexible to meet the course attendance requirements.

In a group of working students, course representatives who had been asked to feed back on student views could not attend the feedback meeting as this was arranged at a time when they had work commitments.

In the most extreme example a student had re-negotiated her employment to a part-time home-based contract so that she could access the course. There was also evidence from one focus group where students felt that tutors were struggling to adapt to the fact that they were teaching a mature, more experienced age group.

- 5.3.3 There were few examples of courses being tailored to individual needs. One mature student was resigned to taking the best of the course content for her own needs while expressing some frustration that some of the content was at a level below her existing competence and knowledge.

- 5.3.4 While some students had caring and work commitments, all had been able to make necessary arrangements to allow access to the course. The findings here concur with those of the HEFCE Foundation Degree report based on the National Student Survey 2007 which found that students felt that 'flexibility may not be the only, or even most important feature of help to them juggle work study or other responsibilities. They (students) point to the need for stability and a timetable that is known well in advance'.

The fact that attendance times for the course were fixed meant that M was able to plan and work around his learning commitments.

- 5.3.5 Most students interviewed made some comment regarding poor levels of organisation of the course and communication with students. Many were aware that the course that they were following was a new course and that they were therefore 'guinea pigs' but the consistency of these findings gave some cause for concern. Particular themes that emerged were the lack of information about course organisation on an ongoing basis (what was happening and when) and the availability of information surrounding the consistency and clarity of assessment methods. Delays in the handing back of work were a common complaint from interviewees, which in one case was believed to have led to a student leaving the course, demoralised through lack of feedback as to how she could improve.

One interviewee related a situation that illustrates the lack of communication:

'The students were due to go on a field trip at 1pm. They had come in for a lecture at 9am that had finished early. That left a 3 hour wait until 1pm to go on the field trip which, when we arrived at 1pm had been cancelled'.

There is a sense from the interviews that younger students will put up with disorganisation but it is quite clear that older students have higher expectations. Graph 4.12 confirms that students in the total SLN cohort rated organisational and communication issues as significant areas for improvement. This also linked to some interviewees' dissatisfaction with perceived double standards relating to the behaviour of tutors. While tutors expected timeliness and reliability from the students it was perceived that not all tutors were able to live by these standards themselves. This was de-motivating and frustrating for some students.

- 5.3.6 There were also issues raised in relation to course content. Some students reported that some modules of courses seemed to be irrelevant, while others questioned the logistics of the course design and the fact that this in one case meant sharing lectures with students from other courses to whom the content was skewed. This had been a trade off against offering a more flexible choice of modules. On another course involving working students the provider had just set the attendance day as the same day of the week for the following year meaning that it would be unlikely that students from the same workplace could attend as part of the new cohort. Graph 4.12 confirms that students in the total SLN cohort rated issues relating to course design and content as a significant area for improvement.
- 5.3.7 Some interviewees also questioned the competence of teaching staff and the quality of teaching, particularly relating to the perception of a trade off between the vocational experience of the teacher (which was welcomed) and the tutor's ability to teach.

K feels that the attitude of some tutors is 'sloppy' with tutors taking mobile 'phone calls during lectures and disappearing during lectures without reason or apology.

There also appeared to be a link between the quality of the teacher and the adequacy of the briefing that the tutor may or may not have received. Other comments about tutors were very positive, as can be seen from graph 4.11 where the positive impact of tutors is rated highly as one of the best aspects of students' courses.

L feels that the staff have a great attitude to learning and provide a great support network for the students. They have been very supportive with helping L to address any additional needs that she has.

- 5.3.8 There was a variation as to the extent to which students reported a focus on post-course employment opportunities as part of the course programme. Some first year students acknowledged that it might be too early in their course to cover this while there were some good examples of best practice.

Even at the start of the first year students were asked to prepare a presentation on how they might use their degree after they had graduated. Students also worked with an 'academic adviser' who was working in the relevant industry; the adviser offered support and guidance related to the world of work.

It was surprising, given the vocational focus of the courses in question, that post-course employment wasn't a continuing feature of all course delivery. In one case a student expressed frustration that his tutors didn't appear to be interested in his efforts to gain work experience and seek avenues that would lead to his future employment.

- 5.3.8 There was also variation in students' levels of satisfaction with the resources available. This was expressed both in terms of a lack of resources in existence and a lack of access to resources that were otherwise available.

At the college the print room and workshops close at 4.30pm and the studios close at 7pm if you are the only student working. M feels that these arrangements reflect the fact that the college is mainly geared to students aged under 25 and that the college doesn't expect students to want to study responsibly at more unusual hours.

Another student had to access required IT facilities away from his own department – this isolated him from his fellow students and his tutors. In contrast, some students praised facilities and resources as a real asset to their experience on the course.

- 5.3.9 There was some level of confusion among students between the role and authority of the validating institution compared to that of the provider institution. In one case there was hostility to the attitude and perceived power held by the validating institution.

5.4 Future Study and Career Aspirations

- 5.4.1. Nearly all students interviewed reported that they found their courses highly relevant to their future career aims. There was no doubt that students perceived their courses as a means to an end, a step on a life plan to achieve a certain type of work or further qualifications.

M feels that the course has really helped him to prepare for the next stage of his career and is so relevant that he still regularly refers to his notes to solve day-to-day problems at work. The contacts made through the course have given M a valuable network of contacts that he has maintained and used regularly.

This supports the findings shown in graph 4.13 in the previous section that showed that 92% of the SLN cohort had an aspiration directly related to their current course. In this sense the SLN has ensured that students are following relevant courses with a clear vocational focus that meets student needs.

- 5.4.2 Issues were reported in relation to the clarity of progression routes to the BA/BSc top up years that allow foundation degree students to convert their foundation degree into an honours degree. There were examples where the route and/or entitlement was not clear to students that were already following that path and who had decided to follow a foundation degree on the basis that the honours degree would be available to them.

Students were informed half way through their second year that there would be a competitive process to gain a place on the BA top-up 3rd year and that part of this process would be based on performance in year 1. This was all news to the students who had been expecting to progress to the top up year as of right, as long as they passed their exams.

This was a serious issue as at worst the plans of the individual could be disrupted and at best it was still a cause of significant anxiety, frustration and de-motivation. The SLN's work in developing progression agreements is tackling this issue.

5.4.2. Regardless of the practical and vocational nature of the courses undertaken by interviewees, it was still common for students to ascribe a high level of status to the honours degree top-up option. A number of students were considering the top-up option without really being able to explain why, while others were carefully considering whether a further year of (more academic) study would suit them or fit their future aspirations. There was a feeling amongst some students that the honours degree was the 'full degree' and that this was the one that would be recognised by employers and society as a whole. The lack of understanding of the Foundation Degree as a valid qualification in its own right would suggest that some students needed further advice and guidance with this aspect of their decision-making.

S was very clear that she wanted to start her own company and had originally planned to study for 2 years and achieve the foundation degree. She also disliked essay writing, which she believed was part of the BA. However, she was still considering doing the BA(Hons) top-up year 'because it's a BA' implying that there was an intrinsic value in the BA that mustn't be overlooked.

Some courses also required students to take a certain module in their second year in preparation for the honours degree top-up year. This brought the 'top-up' decision forward a year. Some students welcomed this as focussing the mind early, while others felt undue pressure to decide before they were ready. Some students didn't know until the end of the first year that they needed to make this decision at that time and did not understand why a certain module was required to gain access to the honours degree.

6. Conclusions & Recommendations

6.1 Student Background and Profile

Conclusions

- 6.1.1 The 642 students that form the SLN cohort were following vocational higher education courses as a result of the additional student numbers made available by the SLN.
- 6.1.2 Wide engagement with and across partner institutions is evidenced by the fact that the SLN cohort covers 4 validating institutions, 9 delivery providers and 46 different courses.
- 6.1.3 The SLN cohort represented 0.8% of the total student intake at the University of Brighton, 3.8% at the University of Chichester, 1.5% at the University of Sussex and 4.2% at Northbrook College Sussex.
- 6.1.4 75% of the SLN student cohort is following a foundation degree with a further 15% following an honours degree.
- 6.1.5 The majority of SLN students (67%) are following courses of a 2-year duration, 80% of students are following full time courses and 92% of students are on a course with either a 100% or 50% full time equivalence.
- 6.1.6 The SLN cohort is skewed towards those students aged under 21 (57%) with a further 17% aged 21-25. The remaining 26% are spread across the remaining older age groups up to age 60. This suggests that progress has been made in extending the age diversity of students but further focus is needed in this area to replicate national figures relating to foundation degrees.
- 6.1.7 60% of SLN students are male.
- 6.1.8 86% of SLN students are white or white British.
- 6.1.9 9% of SLN students declared that they had a disability.
- 6.1.10 40% of SLN students declared a highest qualification on entry of A level or NVQ 3 while a total of 57% have a highest qualification at level 3. Only 4% had entered with a level 2, 2% entered on the basis of previous experience and 1% had no qualification at all. Because of the high proportion of 'unknown' returns within this category, and the grouping within the HESA record of A level with NVQ3, it is difficult to draw many conclusions from this data. There has been some progress in opening up access to students with no or low-level qualifications or entering on the basis of previous experience, but this remains a small proportion of the total.
- 6.1.11 96% of SLN students were living in England before their course started and 48% of SLN students were living in Sussex, with a significant

number coming from the surrounding counties. This shows that the SLN has been successful in enabling local learners to take advantage of the new places created via ASNs.

- 6.1.12 15% of survey respondents had caring responsibilities that needed to be arranged around their course.
- 6.1.13 60% of survey respondents were in work with 39% of those working more than 15 hours a week. 62% of those working were in work that was related to their course thus underlining the vocational focus of the courses being followed.
- 6.1.14 The SLN cohort showed a diversity of background, life stages and ages that suggests that the SLN is making progress in opening up access to a diverse cohort of learners.

Recommendations

- 6.1.15 Provider institutions should continue to build on the progress made to date in opening access to and building capacity for vocational higher education by continuing to take advantage of opportunities to bid for additional student numbers.
- 6.1.16 Further work is needed by the SLN in collaboration with provider institutions to ensure a focus in the areas of:
 - a) Opening up the availability of and access to part time, flexible, vocational higher education to levels that would replicate national benchmarks for foundation degrees.
 - b) Extending the age diversity of learners to levels that would replicate national benchmarks for foundation degrees.
 - c) Opening up access to vocational higher education for students with no or low level qualifications

6.2 Choosing what to study

Conclusions

- 6.2.1 Foundation degrees are not widely understood by potential students or those who are currently undertaking them.
- 6.2.2 Students rarely choose a foundation degree because **it is** a foundation degree although they may be attracted by the characteristics of the course while not associating these with the foundation degree brand.
- 6.2.3 Some course choices are based on work-driven legislative requirements (especially in care and childcare).

- 6.2.4 Some students made choices to study locally to reduce costs and inconvenience and to enable them to balance work/family responsibilities.
- 6.2.5 The impact of IAG agencies on the decision making process is negligible.
- 6.2.6 The majority of students use provider websites, information from family and friends and printed materials such as prospectuses in making their decisions about what to study.
- 6.2.7 The most important factors in course choice were interest in the subject, relevance to workplace, practical learning, enhanced future employment prospects and potential higher future earnings. This suggests that although students often state that they don't understand foundation degrees, they are clear about what they are going to get from their chosen course (whatever label it is given).
- 6.2.8 85% of survey respondents found it easy to get the information that they needed to make their course choice – most often this was available from the chosen provider and/or websites.
- 6.2.9 Some students reported that pre-course information could be inaccurate and misleading in relation to their subsequent experience when undertaking their course.
- 6.2.10 There was inconsistency between provider institutions as to the extent to which the initial assessment of students was effective in judging the student's suitability for the course being undertaken.
- 6.2.11 Students were impressed by the positive attitude of tutors and the positive relationships with fellow students. It is important that these softer benefits are communicated by websites, prospectuses and IAG services.

Recommendations

- 6.2.12 There is a need for the SLN and provider institutions to ensure that marketing and IAG services are effective in ensuring that the true nature and benefits of vocational higher education, especially foundation degrees, are available and clear to the target audience.
- 6.2.13 Provider institutions would benefit from maintaining an awareness of legislative developments in specific sectors in order to identify potential demand for new courses and the development of the curriculum for existing courses.
- 6.2.14 There are opportunities for provider institutions to aim marketing activity at local students stressing the benefits of convenience, low cost and the ability to balance study with other life commitments.

- 6.2.15 The signposting, visibility and availability of IAG support need to be improved by all those with responsibility for the provision of these services.
- 6.2.16 Provider institutions would be well advised to ensure that pages on their website relating to vocational higher education are appealing and accurate as students reported this method as the principle information source relating to course choice. With prospectuses also being popular, there is a need to ensure consistency between these two information sources. The SLN has commissioned further detailed research into the information on entry requirements provided on provider websites and in prospectuses which will be available on the SLN website from August 2008.
- 6.2.17 Provider institutions should continue to develop the practical and vocationally relevant course content that has been shown to enthuse and inspire students.
- 6.2.18 Students would benefit from a review by provider institutions to ensure the accuracy of the pre-course information that is made available to students.
- 6.2.19 Provider institutions need to ensure that the initial assessment of students' suitability for their chosen course is effective, especially in terms of academic ability and the appropriateness of the level of the students' current work role.
- 6.2.20 Provider institutions and IAG agencies could better communicate the softer benefits relating to positive student and tutor relationships if greater use were made of student case studies and quotes on websites and promotional material.
- 6.2.21 Provider institutions might also consider the replication of best practice where existing students are asked (or paid) to show potential students around the college/university as part of the student interview process.

6.3 On-course experience

Conclusions

- 6.3.1 The general nature, design and content of vocational higher education, especially foundation degrees, is highly popular with and valued by students.
- 6.3.2 For 74% of survey respondents their course had met their expectations – this is consistent with national data relating to foundation degrees.
- 6.3.3 The best aspects of students' current courses were listed as learning and practising new skills, meeting new people, positive tutor support and practical work.

- 6.3.4 The aspects of students' courses where room was identified for improvement were course content; cohesion and design; course organisation; communication with students; quality of teaching and availability of required resources. The majority of students at interview or in focus groups mentioned course organisation issues.
- 6.3.5 Stability and consistency of course delivery was of greater importance to students than flexibility. Although flexible delivery was important to some, the majority of students could arrange their lives to fit the course requirements as long as they knew what these were well in advance.
- 6.3.6 There was inconsistency as to the extent to which provider institutions worked with students throughout the duration of the course to ensure that students were prepared for post-course employment.

Recommendations

- 6.3.7 Provider institutions have the opportunity build on the positive aspects of vocation higher education courses listed at 6.3.3 and weave these into promotional activities aimed at the target market.
- 6.3.8 It is important that provider institutions use the information in this report to ensure that their own learner feedback mechanisms are effective in order to act to improve upon the much-repeated student concerns regarding organisation, communication and other issues mentioned at 6.3.4.
- 6.3.9 It is important to students that provider institutions get the basics of course delivery right in terms of communication, consistency and stability before focusing on delivery flexibility.
- 6.3.10 Provider institutions could do more to maintain a focus on supporting students' post-course employment plans throughout the duration of the course.

6.4 Future Study and Career Aspirations

Conclusions

- 6.4.1 The courses followed by the SLN cohort are leading the students to focused career or further education outcomes in their chosen vocational area.
- 6.4.2 74% of survey respondents had a future aspiration of working in an area related to their course while 18% wanted to study further in an area related to their course. This emphasises the vocational nature of the courses and the fact that a high number of students felt they had made the right course choice.

- 6.4.3 90% of survey respondents said that their course had been the main influence on their future aspiration, again underlining the vocational focus.
- 6.4.4 There is inconsistency between provider institutions and across courses as to the quality of information available regarding the availability of honours degree top up years after foundation degrees. The issues related to three areas:
- a) Availability of the honours degree top up
 - b) Conditions placed upon that availability
 - c) Clarity and timeliness of the communication of this information.

A significant number of students reported difficulties with some or all of the above and lacked accurate information prior to starting their course about the path to honours degree top up. This was the issue about which students in interviews and focus groups became most animated.

- 6.4.5 Students are often uncertain as to whether they should aim to achieve a foundation degree or carry on studying to top up to an honours degree. While some made very pragmatic choices others were drifting towards the honours degree due to its perceived inherent value rather than its impact on their own career plans or its suitability for their own learning styles.

Recommendations

- 6.4.6 Provider institutions need to ensure that there is greater clarity and consistency regarding progression routes available especially from foundation degrees to honours degree top up provision. The availability and conditions of these progression routes and the timely communication of this information are key areas for improvement in some provider institutions.
- 6.4.7 Provider institutions need to ensure that quality IAG is available and visible during the course to enable foundation degree students to make better-informed practical choices about progression to an honours degree or elsewhere.

Appendix 1

On-line Survey Questions

On Line Survey Questions

Section 1: About You

1. First Name:
2. Last Name:
3. Date of Birth:
4. Gender: Male/Female
5. Ethnicity: Please tick one box only.

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| White | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Chinese | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| White | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| White - British | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| White – Irish | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| White Scottish | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Irish Traveller | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other White background | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Black or Black British – Caribbean | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Black or Black British – African | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other Black background | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Asian or Asian British – Indian | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Asian or Asian British – Pakistani | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Asian or Asian British – Bangladeshi | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Chinese | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other Asian background | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Mixed - White and Black Caribbean | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Mixed - White and Black African | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Mixed - White and Asian | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other Mixed background | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other Ethnic background | <input type="checkbox"/> |

6. What is the Highest Qualification that you have achieved before starting your current course? Please tick one box only.

- | | |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------|
| GCSE/'O' level | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Advanced Modern Apprenticeship | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| ACCESS course | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 'A' Level / GNVQ / NVQ 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Professional qualification | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| NVQ 4 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| GNVQ | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| HNC or HND | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Foundation Degree | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| First degree | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Higher degree | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| No formal qualification | <input type="checkbox"/> |

7. Have you had to make arrangements to cover childcare or other caring responsibilities in order to enable you to attend your course? Y/N
8. Are you in work (this can be paid or unpaid)? Y/N If 'No' go to question 9
- 8a. Is this work directly related to your course? Y/N
- 8b. If yes, how many hours a week do you work? (please tick one box only):
- Up to 15 hours per week
- More than 15 hours but less than 35 hours per week
- 35 hours per week or more

Section 2: Choosing Your Current Course

9. Please indicate how important each of the factors listed below were in influencing your decision to study at degree level? Please choose one of the possible answers from 'Very Important', 'Important', 'Not Important', 'Irrelevant'

- Interest in the subject
- Long-term career aspiration
- Increase future earnings
- Development of current job role
- Enhancing employment prospects
- Enhance life opportunities in general
- Social and cultural development opportunities
- Meeting new people
- Personal growth and learning

10. Please indicate how important each of the factors listed below were in influencing the choice of your current course? Please choose one of the possible answers from 'Very Important', 'Important', 'Not Important', 'Irrelevant'

- Interest in subject
- Enhanced employability
- Location of course
- Practical 'learning through doing' approach
- Ability to study while working
- Ability to earn while learning
- Flexibility of learning hours
- Relevance to the workplace
- Potential higher future earnings
- Flexible entry requirements
- It was the most relevant course that my chosen university or college offered

11. What sources of information did you use to help you make the decision to study your current course at degree level? Please tick as many as apply.

- Sussex Learning Network Website

- Foundation Degrees In Sussex Website
- Brighton Institute of Modern Music Website
- Northbrook College Website
- Sussex Downs College Website
- University of Brighton Website
- University of Chichester Website
- University of Sussex Website
- Friends and family
- Your employer
- Careers adviser
- Printed promotional materials (e.g. leaflets, cards, prospectus)
- TV, Radio or newspaper advertising
- Other, please state.....

12. Was it easy to get the information and advice that you needed? Y/N

Please explain the reason for your answer.

Section 3: About Your Course

13. Name of University or College attended:

14. Name of Course followed:

15. Was your course?

Full Time

Part Time

16. Has your course met your expectations? Y/N

Please explain the reason for your answer.

17. What has been the best thing about your course?

18. What aspects of your course could have been improved?

Section 4: Your Future

19. What are your future career or study aspirations?

20. How important are the following factors in influencing your future plans at this specific stage in your studies? Please choose one of the possible answers from 'Very Important', 'Important', 'Not Important', 'Irrelevant'

Financial

Your current course

Family or personal issues

Job or work issues

Leisure or other interests

21. Would you like to take part in the next stage of our research? If you're selected you'll get a £15 Amazon voucher for a face-to-face interview or a £10 voucher for a telephone interview.

Telephone interview

Face-to-face interview

Appendix 2

Interview Schedule

Semi Structured Interview Schedule for the SLN Student Survey – Face to Face and Telephone Interviews

1. Please can you tell me the story of how you came to choose your current course and college/university?
 - explore sources of information and their relative effectiveness,
 - if they are studying locally to home, why did they decide to do so,
 - would they not have studied at all if local study hadn't been an option, has this worked out as they hoped / anticipated etc.
 - And the same for part time, childcare, etc.

2. What has been your experience of the course so far and how has this related to your prior expectations?
 - explore course content, mode of study, use any relevant comments from the survey about good points/bad points
 - If it's a work based course how do they feel they are being prepared for industry, advantages / disadvantages etc

3. Are you currently doing any kind of work while you are studying? If so what is the nature of the work and how does it fit with your studying commitments?
 - explore if work is full/part time, impact on study, any caring arrangements

4. What are your future plans for when you have finished your course?
 - explore the factors affecting this, explore how course experience has influenced this, motivation to carry on studying and if so what subject and why, career aspirations

5. Is there anything else that you'd like to tell me about your experience of your course?

Wherever possible the above questions will be asked using and referring to data already collected from the on-line survey. This will ensure that the respondent doesn't feel that they have given the information already and to ensure that the interview effectiveness is maximised by building on the data already held. The existing data from the student response will therefore be a starting point from which to further explore the student's attitudes, experiences and opinions.

Paul Mitchell
25th April 2008

Appendix 3

Focus Group Questions

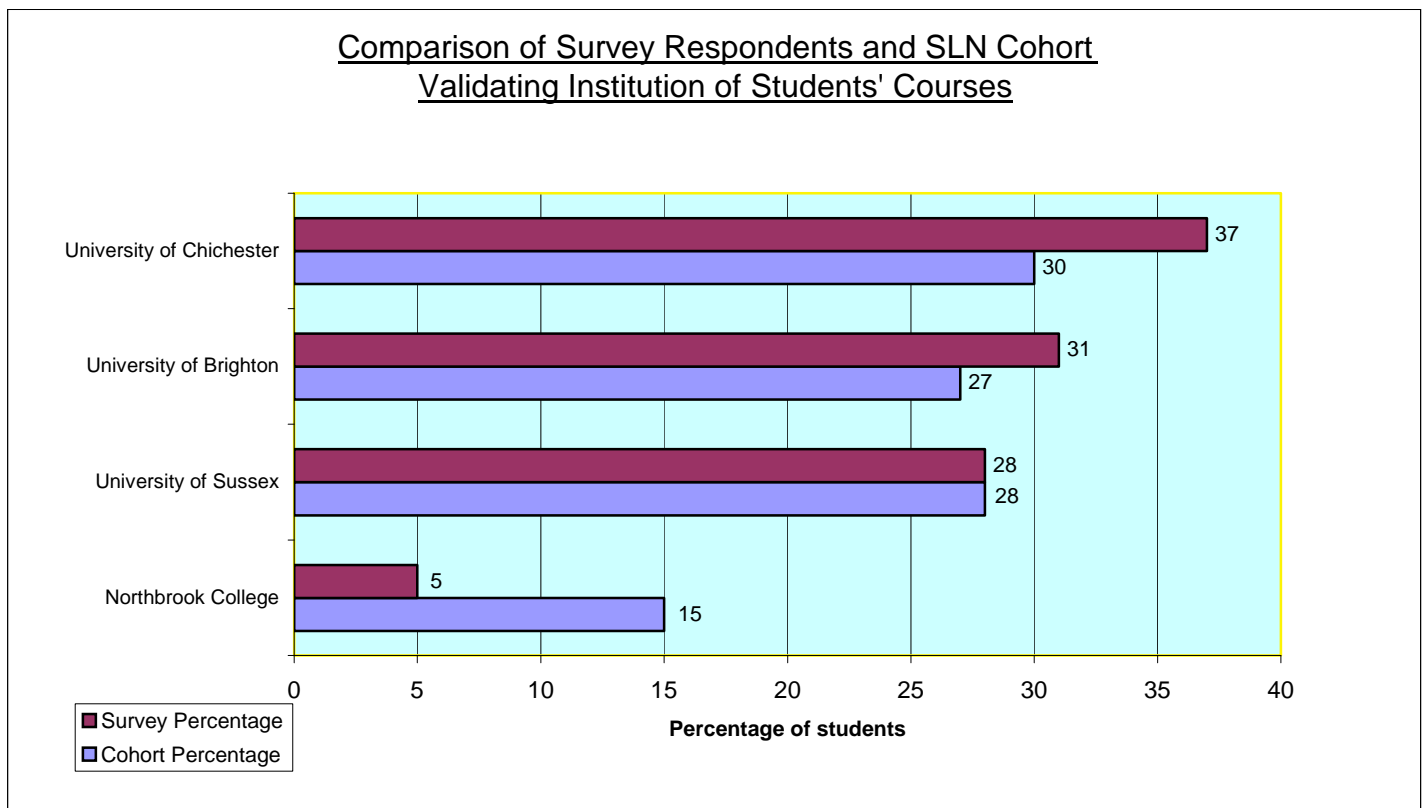
FOCUS GROUP Questions

- Why did you choose to do higher education?
- Before you started the course how much did you know about FDs?
- What were your sources of info?
- Is what you know now different to your current perception?
- Why did you choose to do a FD?
- Why did you choose xxx college/university?
- FDs are designed to be practical and relevant to work – is that your experience?
- How well does the course fit around other commitments e.g. work or caring?
- Is anybody working full time?
- Is this possible while studying?
- Is anybody doing work that is directly relevant to the course?
- Best thing about the course?
- Worst thing about the course?
- What are you aiming to do in the future and how relevant has the FD been in you choosing and potentially achieving your future path?

Appendix 4

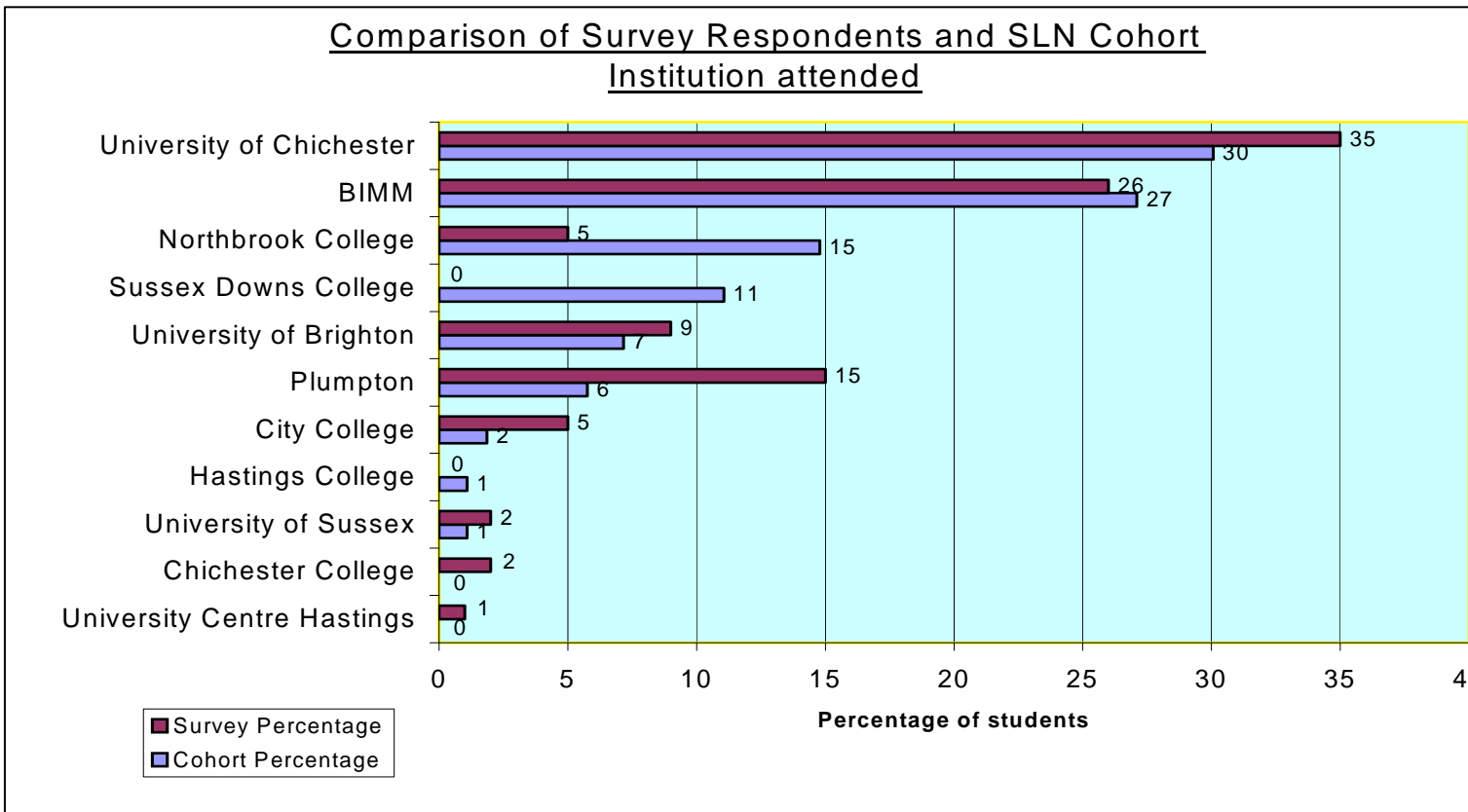
Graphs comparing characteristics of the SLN cohort with survey respondents

Graph A.4.1



Graph A.4.1 shows that a greater proportion of survey respondents were registered for courses validated by the University of Chichester compared to the total cohort (a difference of 7 percentage points). Conversely, survey respondents at Northbrook College Sussex accounted for only 5% of respondents but 15% of the total cohort. The proportions for the Universities of Brighton and Sussex were very similar across both groups.

Graph A.4.2



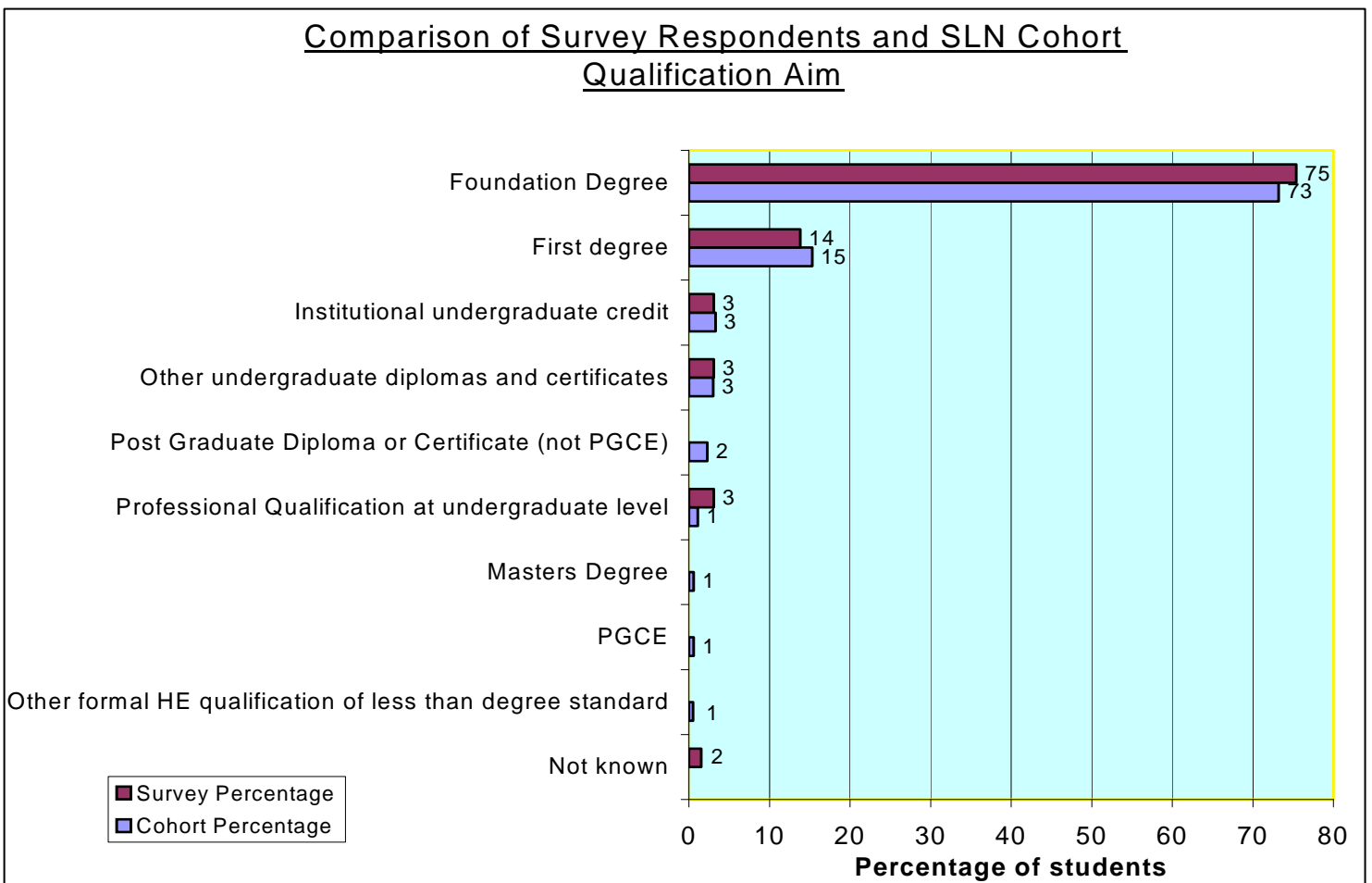
Graph A.4.2 shows the University of Chichester (+5% points) and Plumpton College (+9% points) with an increased proportion of survey respondents compared to the total cohort whereas Northbrook College Sussex (-10% points) and Sussex Downs College (-11% points) show the reverse trend. It isn't known why a greater proportion of Northbrook students didn't respond but there could be a question mark over whether the survey reached the Sussex Downs students as no responses were received at all.

Graph A.4.3

Course Undertaken – Percentage of Students	Cohort	Survey
FD Professional Musicianship	27.1	27.7
FD in Theatre Arts	5.8	3.1
FD in Music Production	5.6	1.5
FD Sports Coaching and Development	5.0	3.1
BSC (Hons) Sports Coaching Science	5.0	7.7
FD in Instrumental & Vocal Teaching	3.7	3.1
FD Early Childhood Studies	3.7	10.8
Continuing Professional Development	3.3	
FD Animal Science	2.8	7.7
BA (Hons) Music and Music Technology	2.8	
BSC in Sport and Exercise Psychology	2.6	4.6
PG Cert E-learning Design	2.3	
FD Early Years Care & Education	2.3	
Certificate in Introduction to Social Work	2.0	3.1
FD in Health & Social Care	2.0	1.5
FD Fine Art	1.9	4.6
FD in Adventure Education	1.9	
Commercial Music	1.9	
FD Digital Media Design	1.6	
FD Computing	1.6	
FD Outdoor Adventurous Activities	1.6	4.6
BA (Hons) Music Production (Top Up)	1.4	
FD in Social Care	1.2	3.1
Early Years Professional Status	1.1	3.1
BA (Hon) Fine Art With Design for Digital Media	1.1	1.5
FD Illustration	1.1	
Graduate Certificate in Social Enterprise	0.9	
BA (Hons) Music Production	0.6	
FD Music Composition for Media	0.6	
BA (Hons) Media Studies and Music Technology	0.6	
MA Public Service and Partnership Management	0.6	
HND in Music Performance	0.6	
Certificate in Substance Misuse: Early Interventions	0.5	
FD in Music Performance	0.5	
FD Wine Business	0.3	1.5
BA (Hons) English and Music Technology	0.3	
BA (Hons) Music With Music Marketing and Administration	0.3	
FD Countryside Management	0.3	1.5
FD Equine Studies	0.3	1.5
FD Horticulture	0.3	1.5
BA (Hons) Business Studies and Music Technology	0.2	
FD Coaching Football	0.2	
BA (Hons) English and Creative Writing and Music Technology	0.2	
BA (Hons) Music With Design For Digital Media	0.2	
FD Bioscience	0.2	1.5
Garden Design	0	1.5

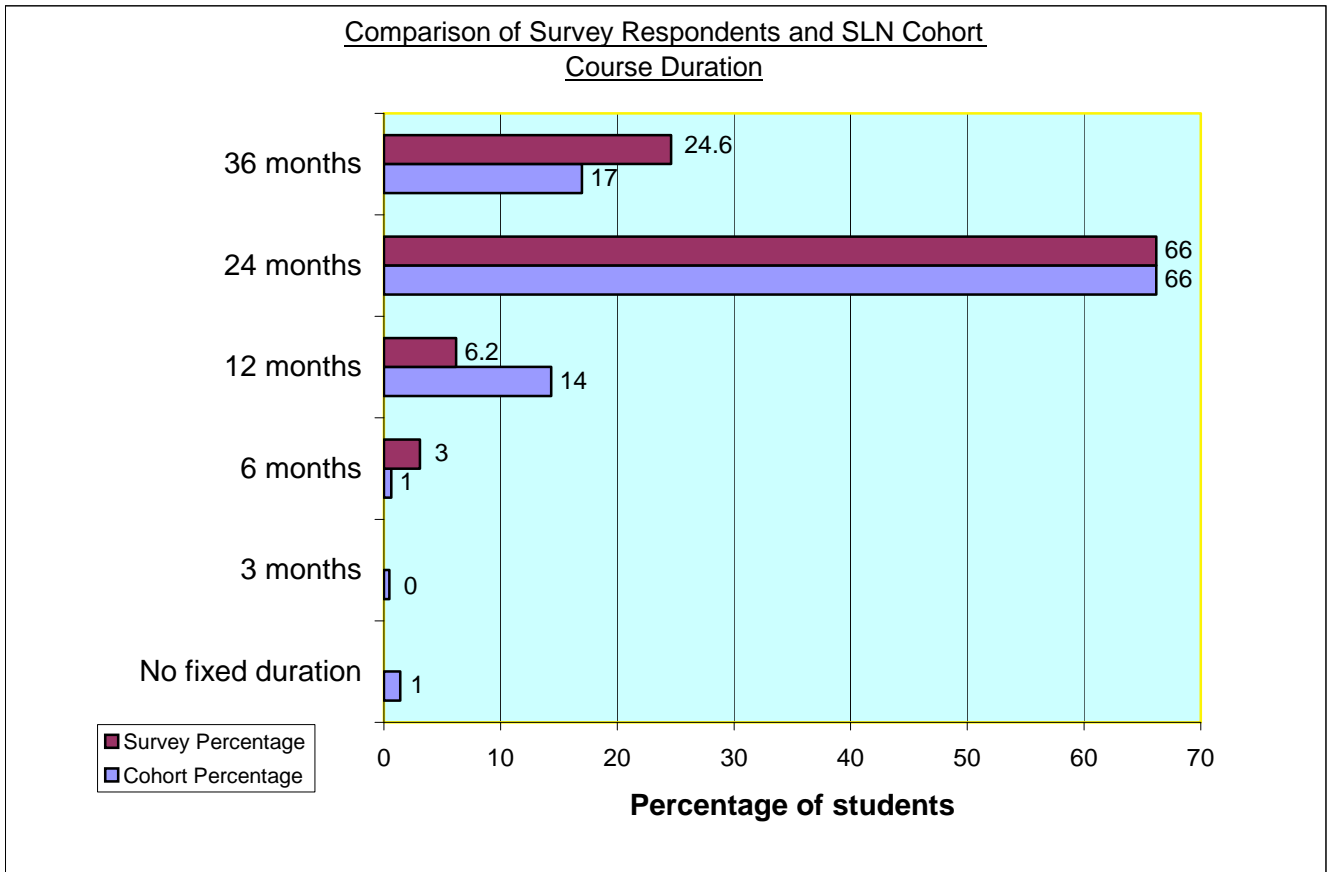
Graph A.4.3 shows the proportion of the SLN cohort and survey respondents registered for each course. The only significant cohort differences are in Animal Science and Early Childhood Studies.

Graph A.4.4



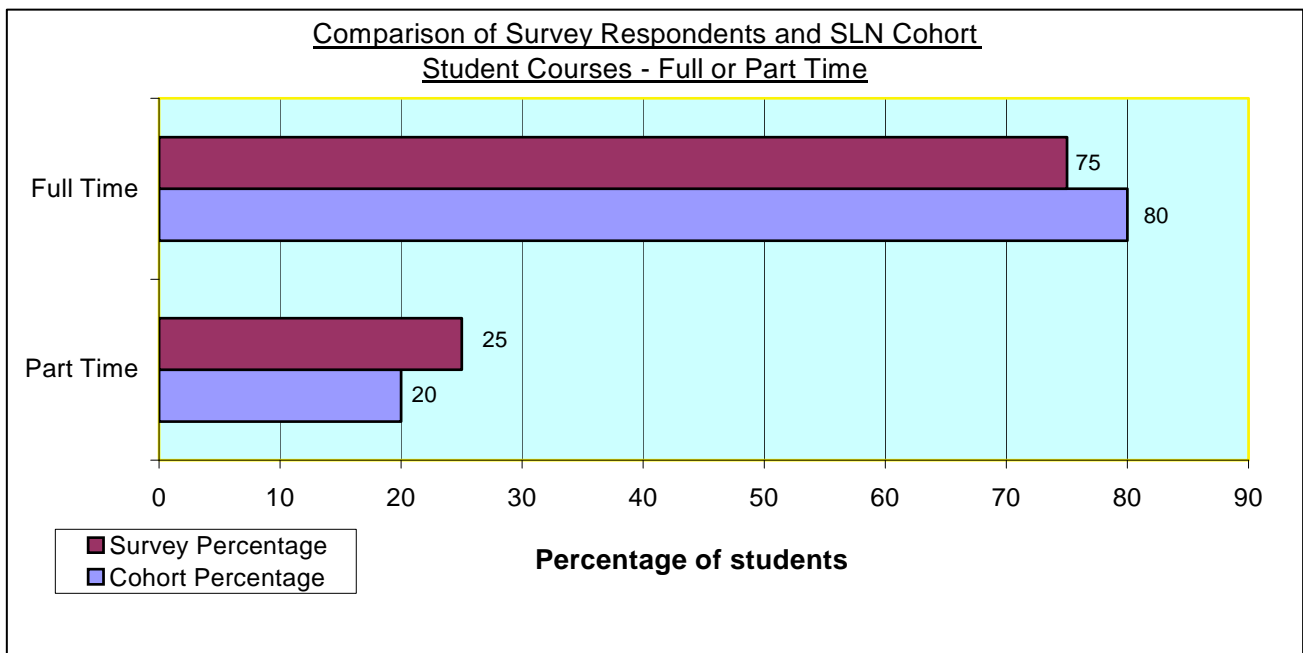
Graph A.4.4 shows that the qualification aims of the SLN cohort and the respondent cohort were broadly similar.

Graph A.4.5



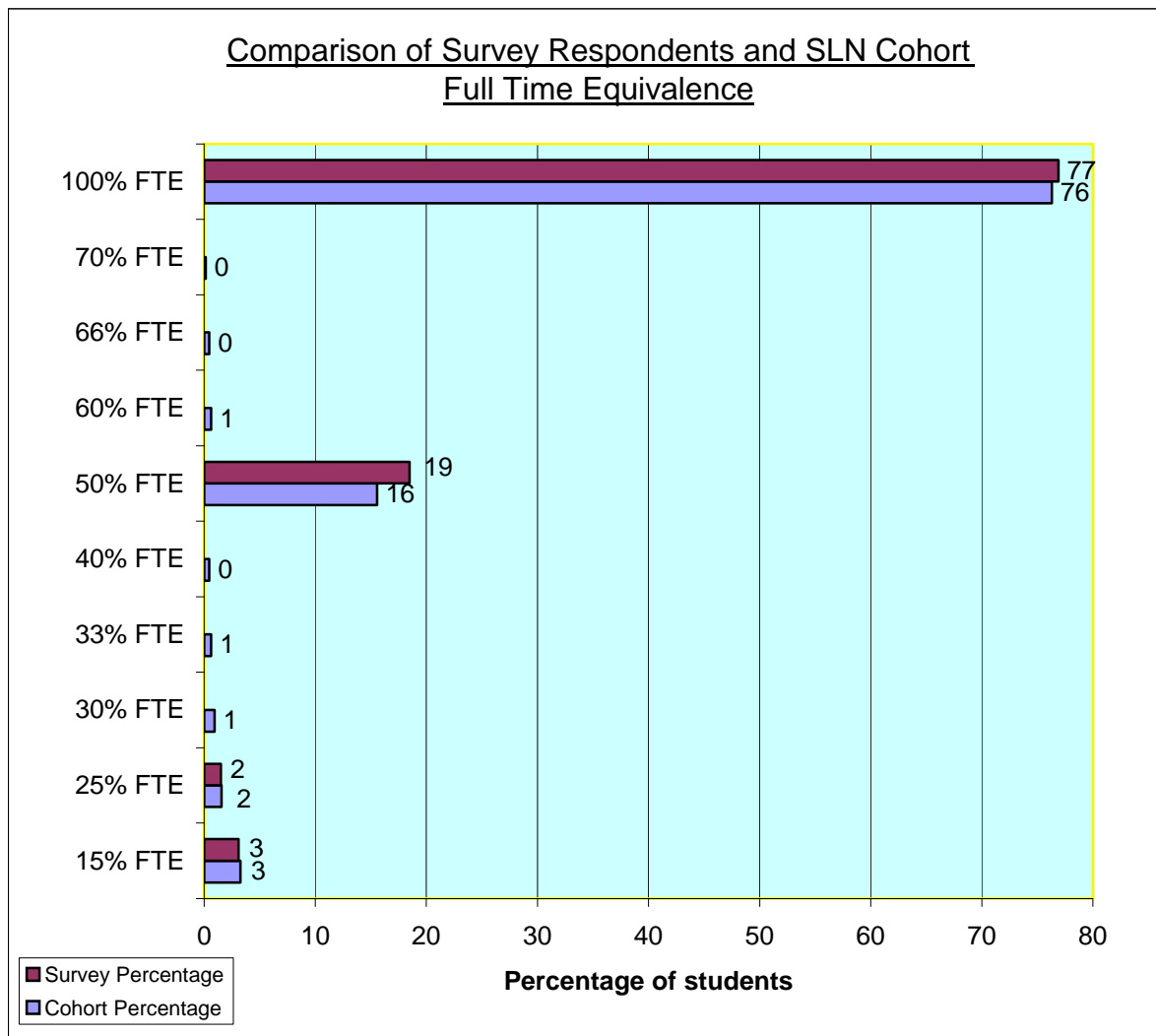
Graph A.4.5 shows that survey respondents were slightly more likely to be following 3-year courses and slightly less likely to be following 1-year courses.

Graph A.4.6



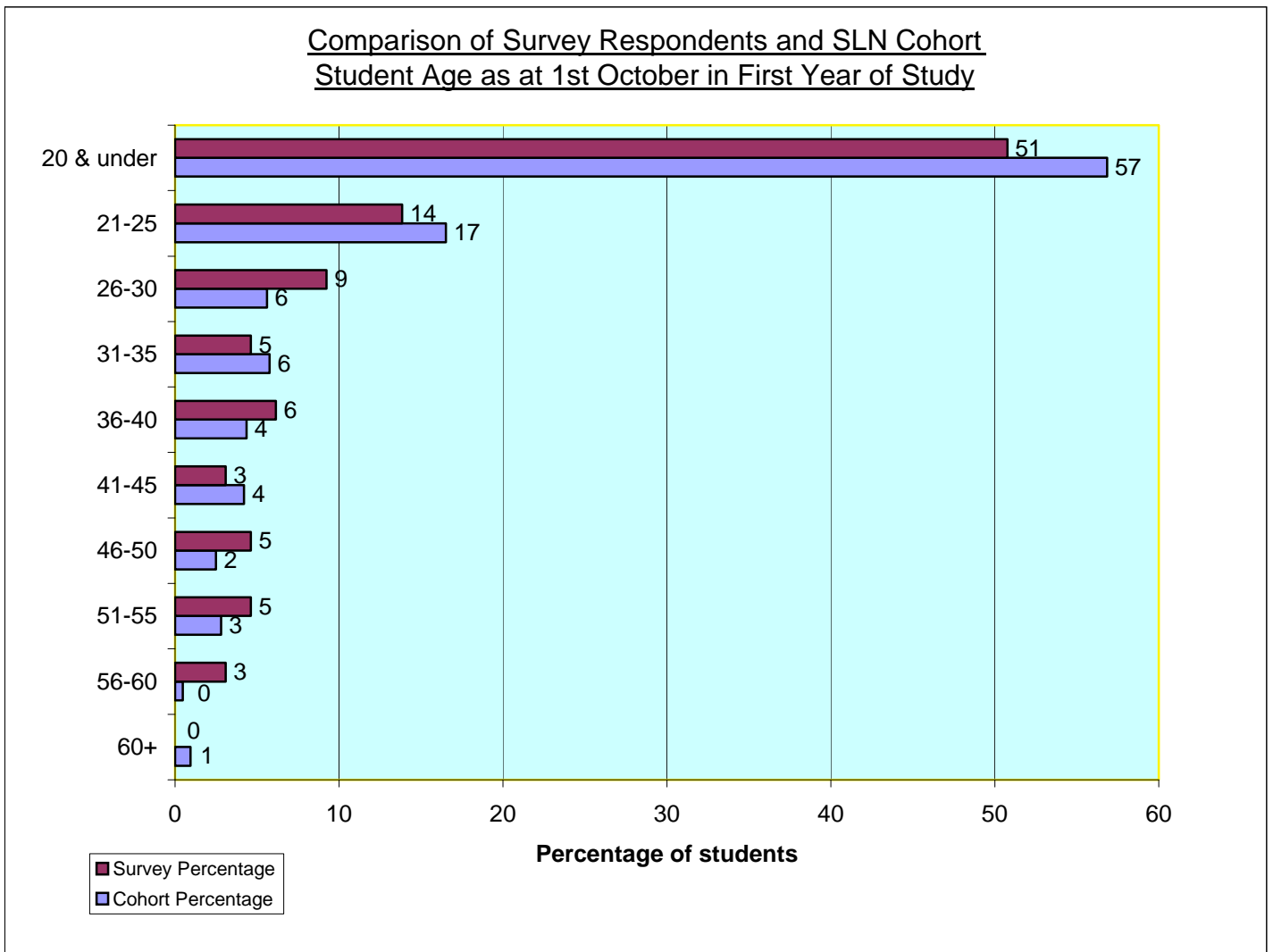
Graph A.4.6 shows no significant difference between the two groups relating to full or part time courses.

Graph A.4.7



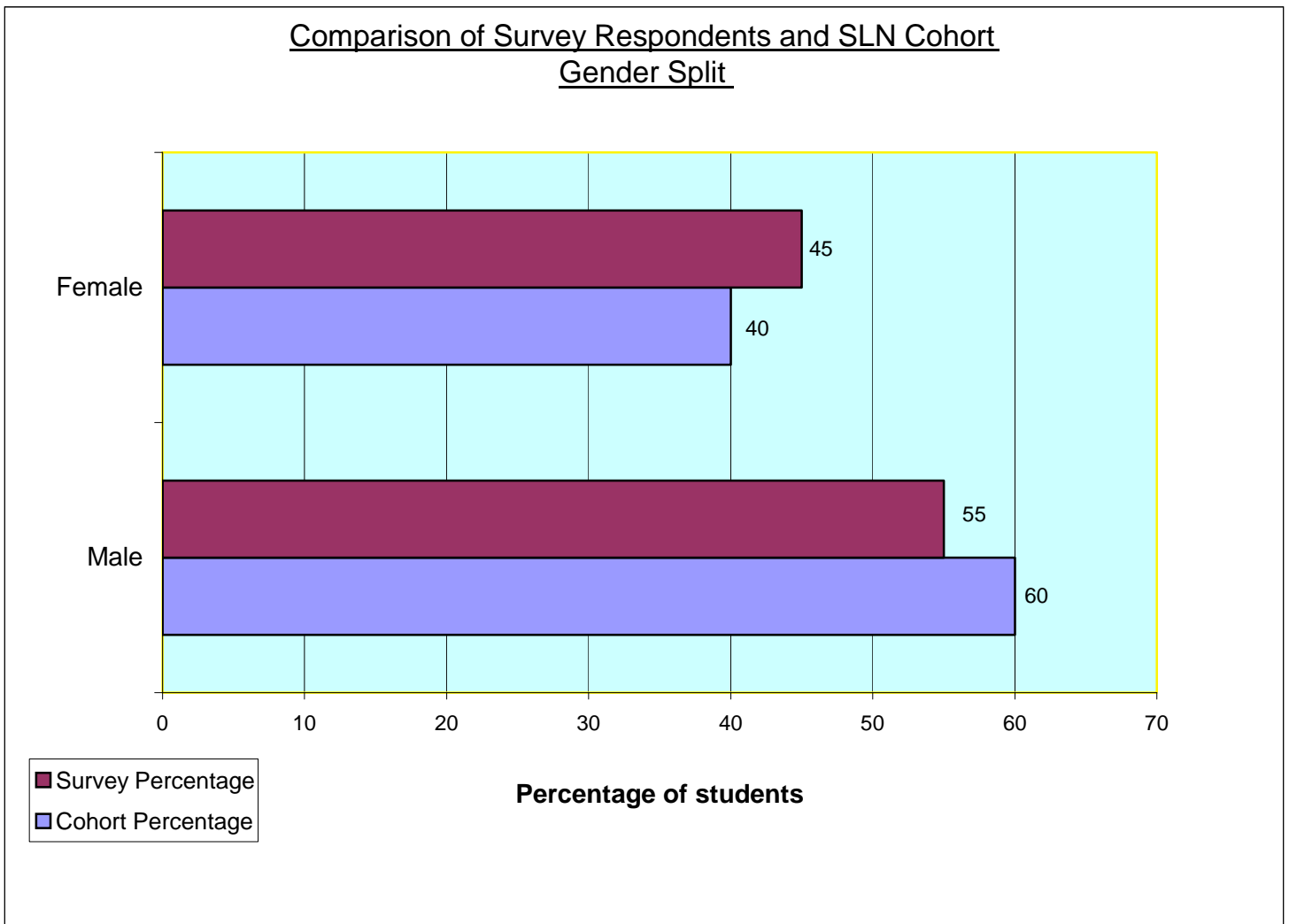
Graph A.4.7 shows no significant difference between the groups relating to the full time equivalence of courses.

Graph A.4.8



Graph A.4.8 shows that students in the higher age group brackets were slightly more likely to respond to the survey.

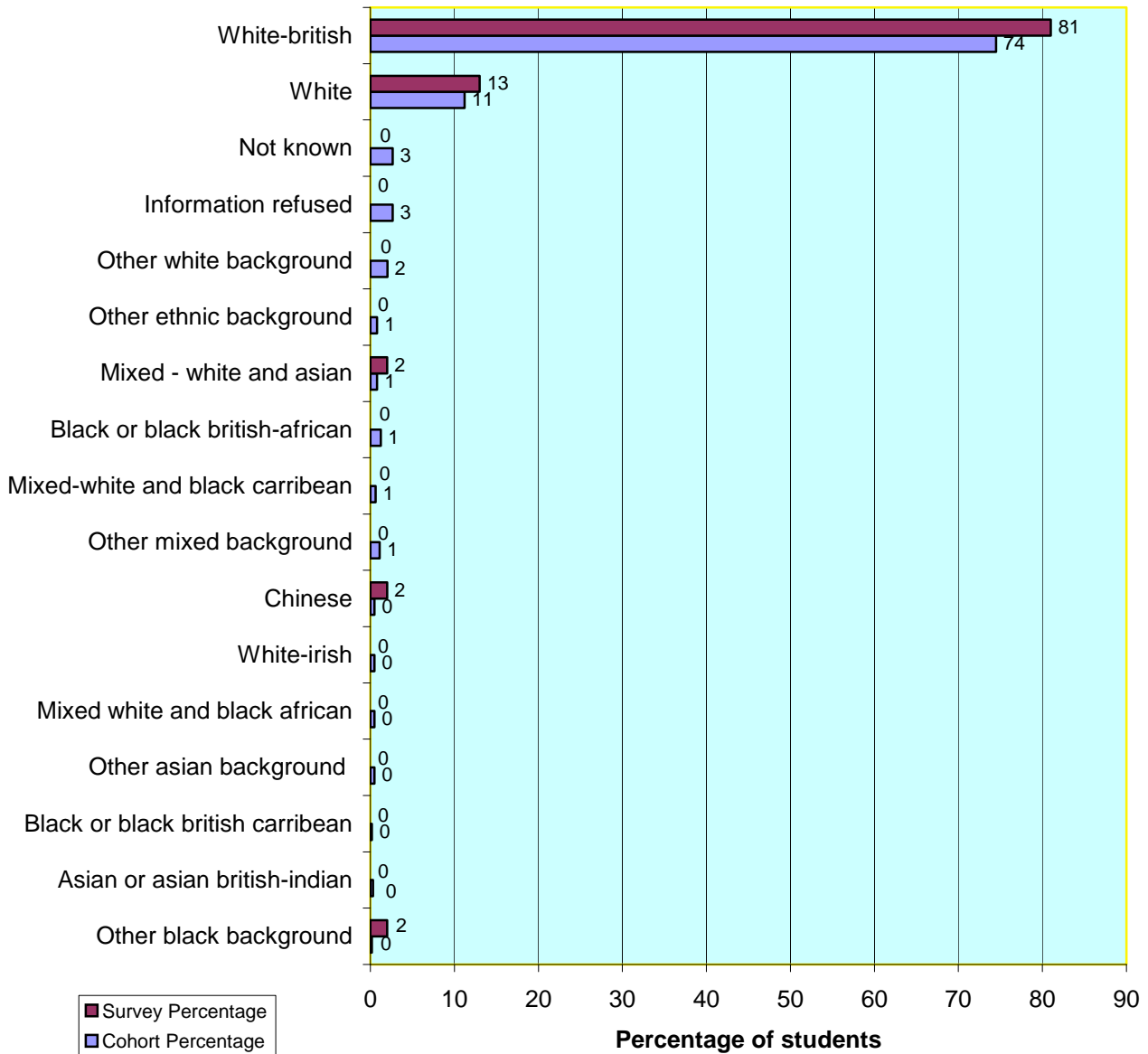
Graph A.4.9



Graph A.4.9 shows a greater proportion of female survey respondents compared to the proportion of female students within the overall SLN cohort.

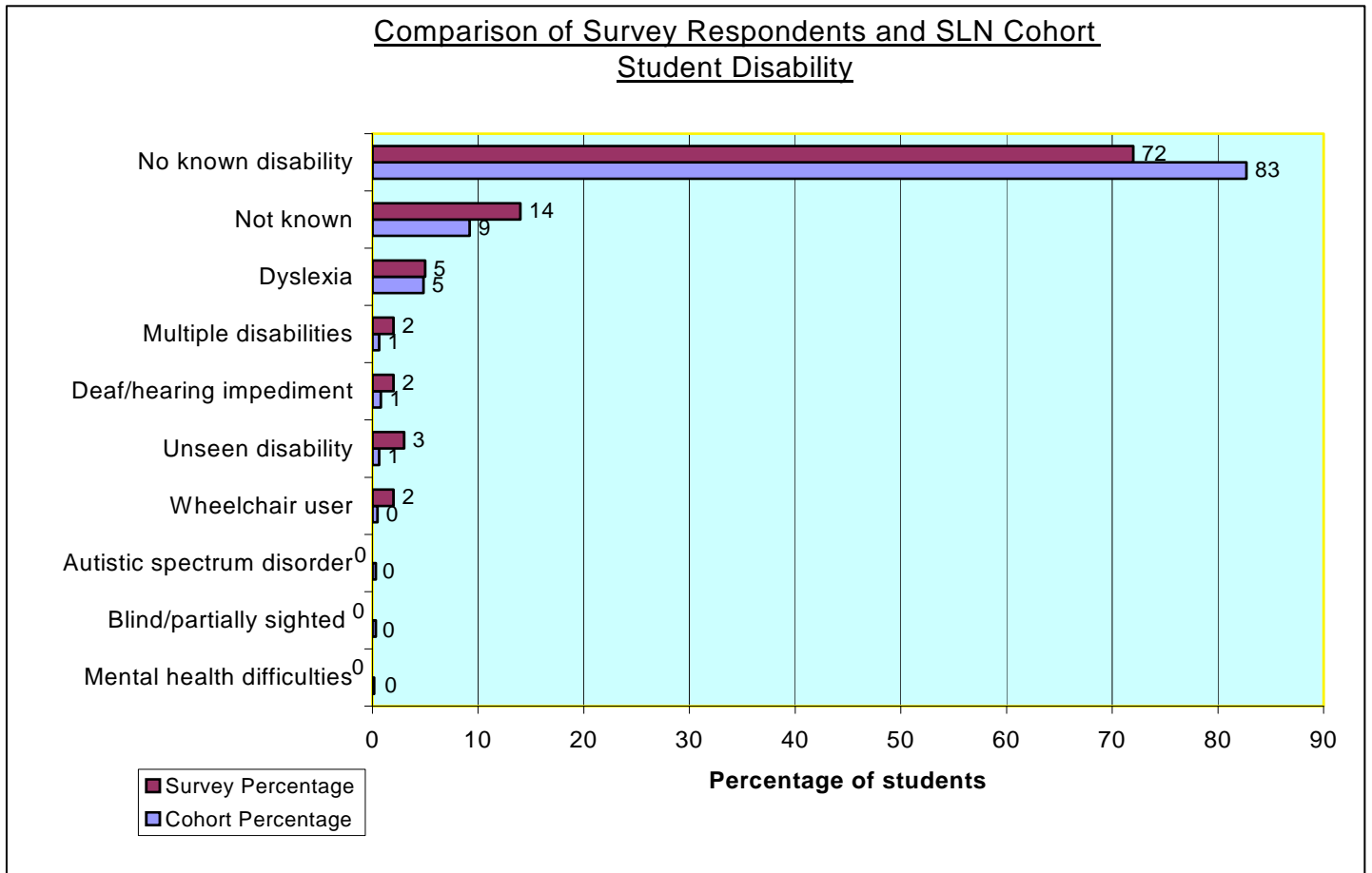
Graph A.4.10

Comparison of Survey Respondents and SLN Cohort
Student Ethnicity



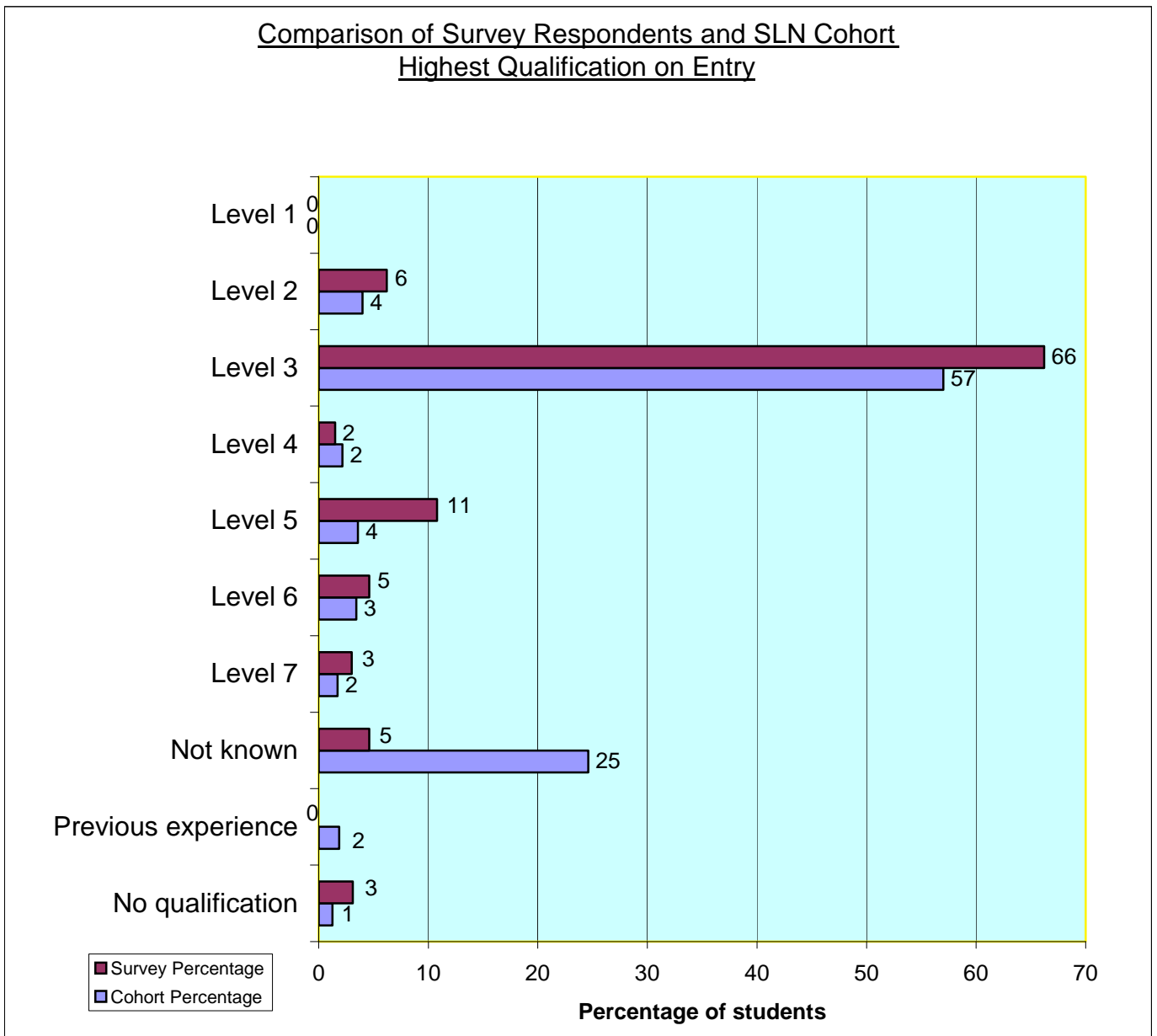
Graph A.4.10 shows that a slightly increased proportion of white and white British students responded to the survey compared with the proportion of these groups in the total SLN cohort.

Graph A.4.11



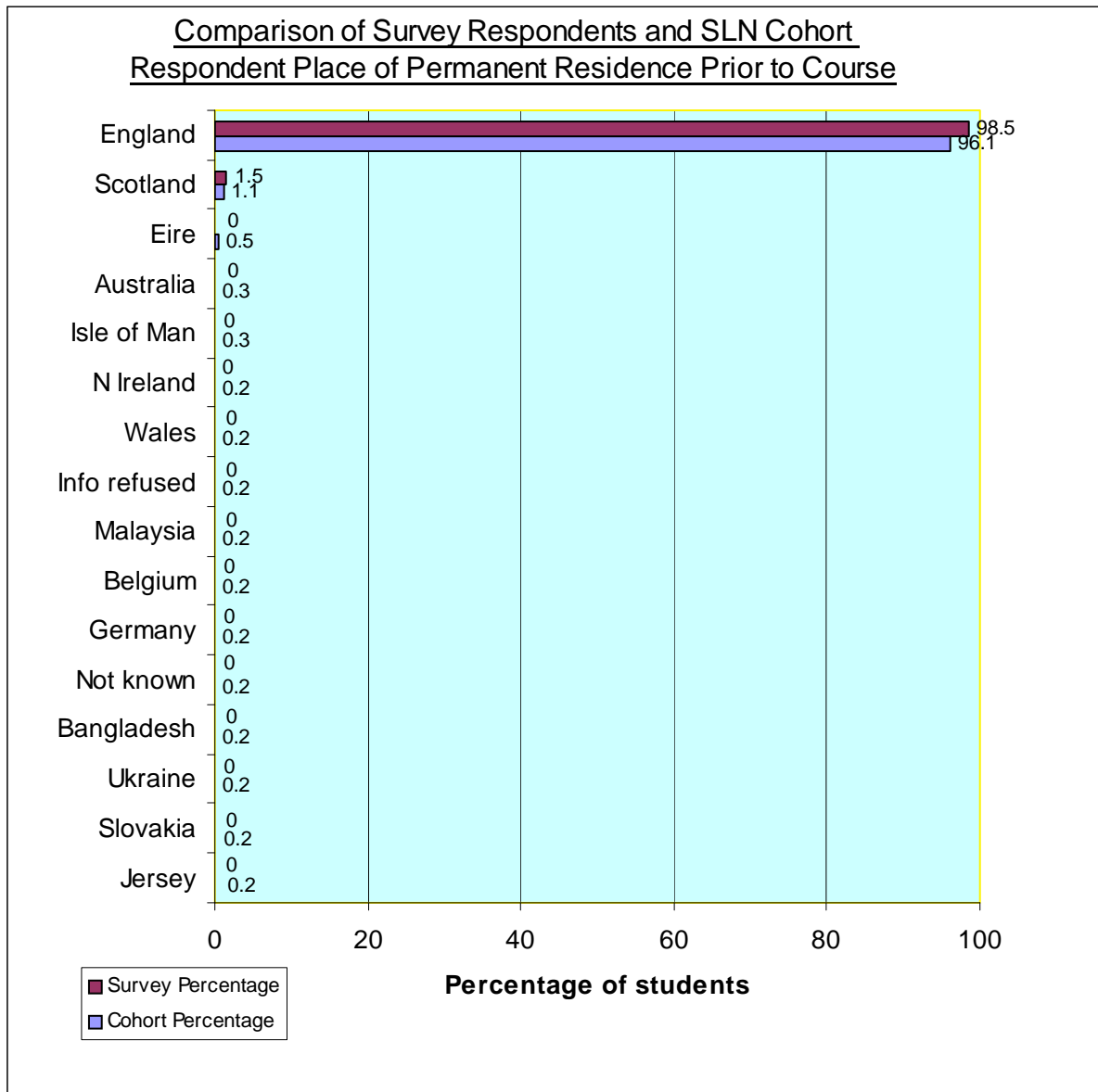
Graph A.4.11 shows that those students with a disability or where disability was not known were slightly more likely to respond to the survey.

Graph A.4.12



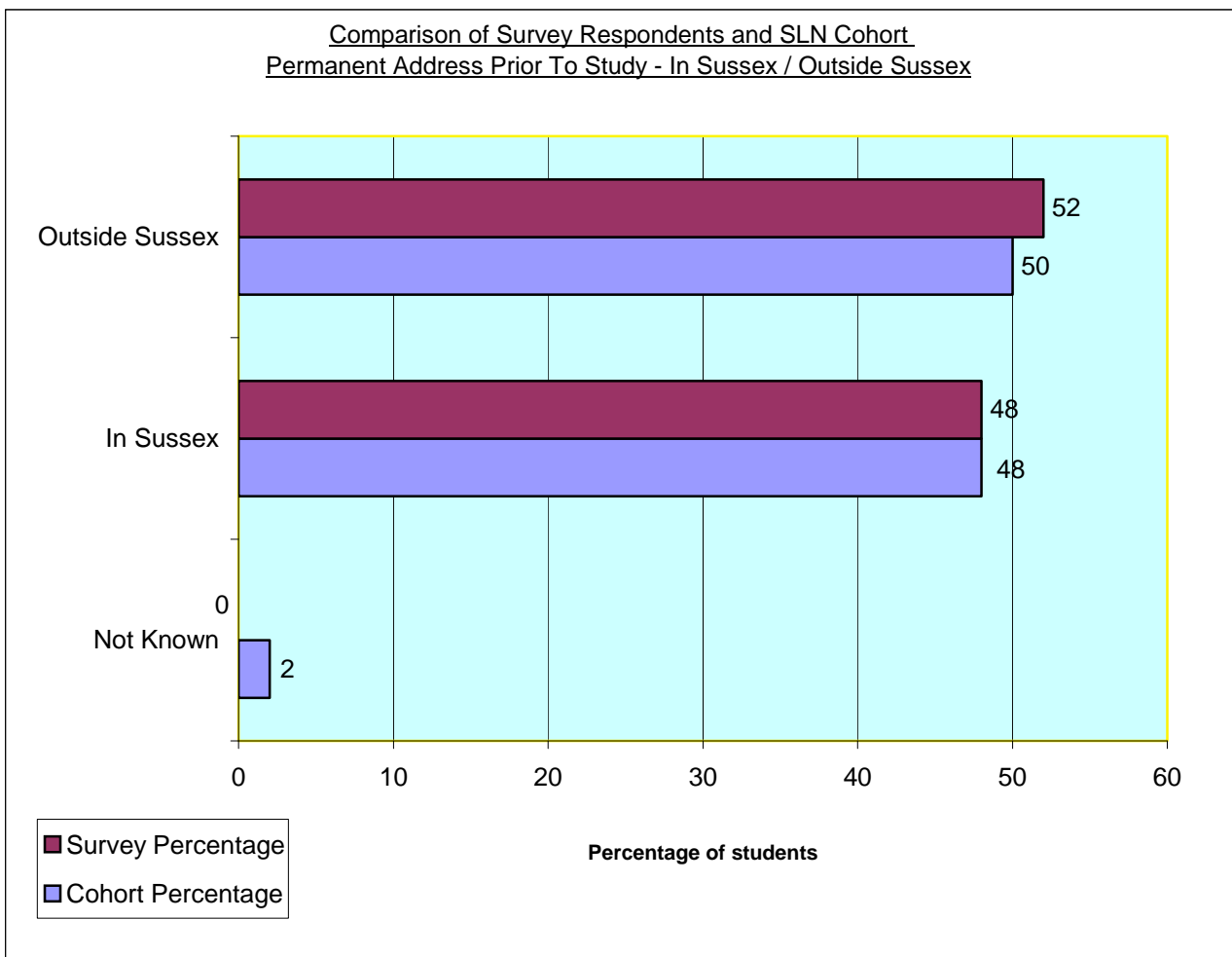
Graph A.4.12 shows broadly similar qualification levels at entry across the total cohort and survey respondent group, when the fact that 'not known' was recorded for 25% of the total SLN cohort against this field is taken into account. For the respondent group, 'not known' reduces to 5%, with other categories increasing as a result.

Graph A.4.13



Graph A.4.13 shows no significant variation across the two groups on the basis of permanent residence prior to the course.

Graph A.4.14



Graph A.4.14 shows that there is no variation between the survey respondent group and the total SLN cohort in terms of the proportion of students that lived in Sussex before starting their course.