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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

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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.