

## Research into Low Success Rates on F/T HNC Courses in Bell College

### Context

Bell College has a major role to play in implementing the government's widening participation agenda and aims to provide articulation routes from HNC through HND to degree level courses for students who may have neither the confidence nor the academic ability to enter directly onto a degree course. As part of this agenda and also to secure student numbers in the highly competitive West of Scotland market the College has had to recruit students who would not normally be considered to have the entry qualifications for Higher Education.

The result is that students enrolling on full-time HNC courses, while generally meeting the entry standard of one Higher, are almost certainly the poorest qualified students entering Higher Education.

Perhaps not surprisingly, success rates are extremely poor, with, in the last few years, less than 50% of those enrolling on full-time HNC courses actually gaining the award at the end of the session. This situation is far from ideal as it has a demoralizing effect on both students and staff and prevents the College meeting its 'articulation' aim as fully as it might.

### Aim of Research

The overall aim of the proposed research is to identify at least some of the underlying factors behind these unacceptable success rates for full-time HNC courses in the firm belief that this will enable action to be taken in order to rectify the situation. The research will be of benefit to individual students who may be helped to succeed on HNC courses and thereby progress up the qualifications ladder as well as being of benefit to the College in terms of better retention/progression rates and ultimately increased student numbers.

### Definition

There are a number of reasons why a student may fail to gain the award of HNC. Some students officially withdraw, or are withdrawn, from the course during a session while for some it may be that their attendance falls away towards the end of the course although they are not officially withdrawn. The third group comprises those who attend the full course but are unable to gain enough credits to achieve the award. For the purposes of this research little or no distinction is made between students who withdraw from the course and students who fail to gain the award.

### Methodology

While in theory for all students who withdraw from a course an official withdrawal form is completed this source of data was disregarded for a number of reasons:

Form completed by member of staff rather than by the student;

No forms completed for students who don't officially withdraw yet fail to complete the award.

It was therefore decided to use a qualitative approach and conduct telephone interviews with students who had enrolled on full-time HNC courses in Session 2001-2002 but who had failed to gain the award. Telephone interviews were chosen as face-to-face interviews would have been exceptionally difficult to organise with ex-students and it was felt that the response rate from a questionnaire would have been very low.

It was recognized that in this small scale research project it would be impossible to try to conduct a telephone interview with every non-successful student and rather than use a sampling approach it was decided to use a 'collective case study' approach and consider 4 full-time HNC courses.

Data on the courses was as follows :

Course	Number Enrolling	Number of unsuccessful students	Number of interviews conducted
HNC Computing	67	31	20
HNC Business Administration	21	15	10

HNC Accounting	17	7	4
HNC Applied Biological Sciences	16	6	2

### Research Findings

Interviews produced a considerable amount of qualitative data and detailed analysis of the data is ongoing.

Initial Findings are as follows:

Students who did not succeed knew little about their course before they enrolled;

A considerable proportion of students had had no long term plans to do the particular course they enrolled on and in many cases the decision to enrol was a rushed, last minute rather than a planned decision;

Consequence of the above was that few students who did not succeed felt any great sense of commitment to their course;

Majority of students felt there were too many assessments and they were not well scheduled

A considerable number of students found the course they undertook to be more difficult than expected

### Initial Conclusions

Lack of commitment meant that when problems such as finance or a difficulty with the course arose students tended to drift away rather than addressing the problem.

Solutions would appear to include:

Provide clearer and fuller pre-course guidance to ensure that prospective students really know what they are undertaking.

Take steps to look at the assessment burden on HNC courses

Take steps to increase the level of academic guidance and support available to HNC students

### Next Steps

Once all the data has been analysed and firm conclusions and recommendations drawn up, the findings will be presented to the College's Teaching & Learning Committee with a view to an action plan being produced.

The project has been extended this session and now involves conducting telephone interviews with **all** students who withdraw from any full-time College course.

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