



Edge Hill University

Widening Participation Research Centre

What influences vocational choices?

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**Research Report
submitted to Aimhigher Greater Merseyside,**

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This research project 'What influences vocational choices?' was undertaken by the Widening Participation Research Centre, Edge Hill University between October and December 2007. Commissioned by Aimhigher Greater Merseyside (AHGTM) the outcomes of the research will be used to inform their programme of work to better support students pursuing vocational education pathways and thus promote greater parity of esteem between academic and vocational qualifications.

Using a mixed methods approach the project included a literature review of key factors influencing young people's decisions on progression, a questionnaire survey with 400+ post16 students, focus group discussions with students and staff interviews.

This report presents an analysis of the findings of the research. Conclusions drawn from the analysis inform recommendations for consideration by AHGTM. A summary of these can be found in Sections 9 and 10.

Research Conclusions

- Recognise that young people are not explicit about the vocational / academic divide,
- Students want to keep their options open and that many make decisions step-by-step.
- Recognise the influence of parents on young people's decision making at both post-16 and post-18 options – work with parents particularly pre-16.
- Ensure teachers, FE tutors and other staff including graduate mentors in schools, work based learning or colleges are promoting parity of esteem between academic and vocational routes, and providing accurate information to all students without prejudice.
- Ensure the gap in IAG for vocational progression routes, and flexible HE is supported through high quality and specific staff development with access to expertise in this area and evaluations of practice and quality of guidance.

Recommendations

Recommendations based on the findings of this research suggest four areas of action.

1. Consolidate the strategic role for AHGTM role in supporting vocational progression routes

Strengthen strategic influence by developing the working group's contribution to activities such as the Lifelong Learning Network, acting as advisors on AHGTM funded project work and other projects focussed on working with employers and contributing to policy on vocational progression.

2. Capture and communicate a vocational progression routes strategy

There is a range of vocational progression routes interventions and resources being funded through AHGTM. Communicating what these are and how they link together would strengthen the profile of its vocational progression routes work and would raise parity of esteem.

3. Ensure all AHGTM activities have a vocational progression routes element.

Examples of how a vocational progression can be integrated into generic and specific activities have been highlighted through this research.

- **Guidance and personal planning rooted in awareness of vocational options**
- **Clear information on financing part-time and work-based higher education study**
- **Clear real life examples of vocational progression pathways**
- **A focus on sector specific support activities**

4. Staff development on IAG for vocational progression routes with key influencers

Provide targeted staff development on effective and accurate IAG for vocational progression routes.

- Build expertise in providing IAG on vocational progression routes through influential people close to students.
- Increase the broad understanding of vocational progression routes, part-time study and financing including working with parents, schools, colleges and employers
- Assist in understanding 14-19 Diplomas and implications for student decisions

What influences vocational choices?

1. Introduction

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This report presents an analysis of the findings of the research. Conclusions drawn from the analysis inform recommendations for consideration by AHGTM. A summary of these can be found in Sections 9 and 10.

Sections 1, 2 and 3 include an introduction and background to the project and a description of the research approach. Section 4 provides a demographic and academic profile of students involved in the project. Sections 5 and 6 describe the influential factors in the process of decision making and the key influences on decision making. Section 7 presents young people's perceptions of higher education and Section 8 describes strategies to support vocational progression routes. Sections 9 and 10 draw together research conclusions and recommendations to AHGTM.

1.1 Aims and purpose of the research project 'What influences vocational choices?'

This research investigates the factors influencing young people's decisions to pursue vocational courses of study on Greater Merseyside. Specifically it explores who and what influences young people and why and how their decisions are influenced, and assesses the effect of interventions to support vocational progression routes such as Aimhigher projects. The study further explores young people's process of decision making, their educational identities, perceptions and awareness of vocational courses and awareness of progression opportunities. Perspectives from staff and young people are investigated to consider what supports vocational choices.

1.2 Research questions

1. What factors influence young people's decisions to take vocational or academic courses?

2. What factors influence young people's decisions about post-16 (and post-18) provision?
3. Do vocational and academic students' perceptions of HE differ? If so, in what way and why? *
4. How are these decisions influenced by peers, parents, carers, teachers and others?
5. Have AHGTM programmes had an impact on these decisions? If so, why?
6. How do respondents perceive the new 14-19 diploma scheme? **
7. What is the best role for AHGTM in supporting vocational learners and promoting parity of esteem between vocational and academic courses?

* As will be seen in Section 4 students did not readily view themselves as vocational or academic students, but once participating in particular courses, knowledge of potential pathways varied.

** This question meant little to the students as it was not relevant to their stage in education. The question was discussed with staff.

2. Vocational learning and progression

Vocational learning has long struggled for parity with academic qualifications in the UK education system. But there is currently a greater recognition of the need for a more highly trained workforce and the importance of vocationally-oriented qualifications and skills. The 2005 White Paper '14-19 Education and Skills' (DfES 2005) identifies the need to: provide better vocational routes; introduce more choice of what and where to study; ease combining vocational and academic learning; and increase the capacity of the education system to offer vocational education.

Nearly three-quarters of 16-year-olds progress to full-time education and almost half of these go on to vocational education and training courses in further education (FE) colleges (DfES, 2001 in Colley et al., 2003: 472). But traditionally the educational system has set-up a dichotomy between vocational qualifications and A-levels, and associated progression routes (Williams, 2000).

In order to reach the Government's target of 50% of people aged 18-30 participating in higher education by the end of 2010 (DfES 2000) and to realise the commitment to shift from an 'elite' to a 'mass' higher education system (HE), there has been an increasing emphasis on trying to recruit vocational learners into HE (Clark, 2002, Greenwood, 2004). However, nationally fewer than 50% of suitably qualified vocational learners progress to HE, compared to over 90% of all A-level students progressing to HE by the time they are 21 years old (Action on Access, 2005; DfEE, 2000). Progression to HE (level 4) learning via a vocational route remains a minority option, and with regards to academic, highly selective degree courses at pre-1992 universities, the A-level route is overwhelmingly the one taken (Connor

and Little, 2005). Thus, in the HE sector students with vocational level 3 qualifications are concentrated in:

- Certain courses/subjects, e.g. nursing;
- Certain universities and colleges; generally post-1992 institutions and colleges of HE;
- Certain types of programmes, e.g. part-time courses, Higher National Certificates (HNCs) and Foundation Degrees.

Aimhigher aims to promote parity of esteem between vocational and academic educational pathways. In particular AHGTM has a range of projects devoted to promoting vocational progression routes through work based learning with colleges and training providers, through schools based long term interventions from Year 8 and in providing significant IAG and resources for staff.

A further measure aimed at addressing education needs of the future workforce, the 14-19 Diplomas, are being introduced from 2008. At levels 1 and 2 they will be designed to ensure progression to general qualifications or Diplomas at the next level. At level 3 Diplomas aim to prepare young people for employment (including apprenticeships), university or other further study, thus offering students access to range of vocational and academic progression routes.

3. Research Approach

The research approach included the following elements:

- Literature review, including published and grey material
- Questionnaire completed by 402 young people participating in three different types of educational provision (work-based learning, vocational and academic courses) across six establishments in Greater Merseyside;
- Focus groups with a mix of young people from the same types of educational provision;
- Interviews with staff who support young people regarding progression.

3.1 Literature review

We undertook a review of recent literature about vocational learning. In particular we focused on the factors influencing young people's decisions about post-16 progression; their perceptions of academic and vocational qualifications; the factors encouraging and discouraging young people to pursue vocational and academic routes and how these relate to characteristics such as class/parental occupation, parents' education background, school attended etc; and the influence on decisions of IAG and professionals, parents/carers, peers, teachers and of interventions, such as IAG initiatives and Aimhigher programmes.

An initial review (drawing on Gorard et al 2006 and May and Harper 2006) informed the development of the questionnaire and the focus groups with young people, and the interviews with staff. A fuller review was undertaken, mostly of published literature, to inform our analysis of the research findings.

3.2 Questionnaire

A questionnaire (Appendix 1) was designed to explore attitudes and experiences relating to post-16 and post-18 progression in general, and vocational learning in particular. At an initial meeting with AHGTM it was agreed that the research would focus on a mix of students taking post-16 vocational or academic courses or a mix of both. The survey was administered to 402 students who are studying at further education (FE) colleges, work based learning with colleges or training providers, and in sixth forms including an academy and a special school. Respondents included students studying for both academic and vocational qualifications including apprenticeships. A topic list of items in the questionnaire is included in Appendix 1. A full copy of the questionnaire can be obtained on request.

3.3 Focus groups with young people

We undertook six focus groups with young people about progression issues. This provided qualitative data which further illustrates what influences them and how as well as how they perceive their educational identities and opportunities for progression. A semi-structured interview schedule for the focus groups discussion is contained in Appendix 2.

3.4 Interviews with staff

We undertook informal discussions and telephone interviews with key staff in each of the educational institutions involved in the study to explore their views about vocational and academic progression routes, and their views on the factors that influence young people's decisions. Staff interviews were conducted in parallel with the administration of the questionnaire with selected follow up interviews. A semi-structured interview schedule for staff discussions is contained in Appendix 3.

4. Profile and background of learners

4.1 Place of study

The findings are drawn from questionnaire responses from 402 post-16 learners in Greater Merseyside. Respondents included students studying for both academic and vocational qualifications, and a mix of both. Students were studying at school sixth forms including an Academy and a special school for young disabled people, at FE colleges or with private training providers. (Table 1)

Table 1: Place of study

Place of study	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Sixth Form Schools	64	15.9	15.9
Sixth Form Academy	151	37.6	53.5
WBL Apprentices	111	27.6	81.1
FE	76	18.9	100.0
Total	402	100.0	

4.2 Current academic achievement

Respondents were asked to list their existing qualifications and grades. A few of the students were unsure about specific qualifications on the list and checked with their tutors and friends if these were the qualifications that they had studied for. Of the 402 students surveyed only 355 (88%) responded to this question.

Out of the 402 students 214 students (53.2%) have five or more GCSE at grades A*-C and 118 students (29.3%) have one to four GCSE at grades A*-C. Of the 402 students 267 (66.4%) have one or more GCSE at grade D-F, U.

Other existing qualifications include Key Skills (12 students), NVQ Level 1 (5 students), NVQ Level 2 (12 students), NVQ Level 3 (1 student), Intermediate GNVQ (47 students), AVCE (1 student), BTEC 1st Diploma (22 students), BTEC National Diploma (8 students), AS Level (28 students), A Level (6 students), other sports and leisure related (17 students), other professional related (4 students).

4.3 Gender, Age, Disability, Ethnicity

Approximately 69% of respondents are male and 31% are female. The majority were 16 (40%) and 17 (40%) years old. 19% are aged 18 or over. For some students this represented a second chance to repeat level 2 / level 3 qualifications, or returning to education after a period of seeking work. For some of the young disabled students this reflects a longer time studying for level 2 qualifications due to interrupted study.

We used the AHGTM social inclusion form to gather data, however we have limited information about the disability, ethnicity and socio-economic background of the participants as only half of the respondents opted to provide information about these issues.

Of the half who answered these questions, ten students considered themselves disabled, while nine students are registered disabled.

The majority of those who responded described themselves as white English. (Table 2).

Table 2: Ethnicity

Ethnicity	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Asian	1	.2	.4	.4
Somali	1	.2	.4	.9
Other Black African	1	.2	.4	1.3
Black European	1	.2	.4	1.7
Other Black	1	.2	.4	2.2
White British	11	2.7	4.7	6.9
White English	201	50.0	86.6	93.5
White Scottish	3	.7	1.3	94.8
Other White British	3	.7	1.3	96.1
Traveller of Irish Heritage	2	.5	.9	97.0
Bosnian-Herzegovinian	1	.2	.4	97.4
Arab other	1	.2	.4	97.8
Filipino	2	.5	.9	98.7
Yemeni	1	.2	.4	99.1
Other Ethnic Group	2	.5	.9	100.0
Total	232	57.7	100.0	
Missing System	170	42.3		
Total	402	100.0		

4.4 Parents/ Carers/ others employment and qualifications background

In order to provide insight into the socio-economic background of students we asked for employment information and educational background of parents/ carers/other people students live with.

Using the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification scheme, of those who responded 23.6% of all parents/ carers/ others are from the top three socio-economic groups (NS-SEC 1-3) and 68.1% are from the lower socio-economic groups (NS-SEC 4-8). (Table 3).

Table 3: Parents/Carers/ other: Job

Parent/ Carer / other Job NS-SEC	Parent/ Carer 1	Parent/ Carer/ 2	Parent/ Carer 3	Parent / Carer 4	
higher managerial	4	4			NS-SEC 1-3 127
higher professional	10	11	1		
lower managerial and prof	56	36	4	1	
intermediate occupations	41	26	3		NS-SEC 4-8 366
small employers	31	30	5	2	
lower supervisory technical	12	13			
semi-routine	57	35	1		
routine	29	31	2		
unemployed	29	18	1		
not known	16	16	1		Not known33
retired	4	7			Retired 11

Total	289	227	18	3	537
Missing System	113	175	384	399	
Total	402	402	402	402	

Many of the students (61%) reported they do not know the details of the educational background of their parents/ carers / other people they live with. Of the 113 who do, over a third (38.9%) of these have higher qualifications. (Table 4)

Table4: Parent/ Carer/ Other: Highest Qualification if known

Parent/ Carer/ Other: Highest Qualification if known	Parent/ Carer 1	Parent/ Carer 2	Parent/ Carer 3	Parent / Carer 4	Total each qualification
NVQ Level 1	1	2	1		4
NVQ Level 2	2	1			3
NVQ Level 3	3	1			4
A Level	8	11	1		20
Apprenticeship	3	2			5
GCSE	18	14	1		33
HNC		1	1		2
HND	3	2			5
Degree	10	8	2	3	23
Masters	4	8			12
PhD	2	0			2
Not known	233	3	12		Not known 248
Total	287	64	18	3	
Missing System	115	338	384	399	
Total	402	402	402	402	

5. The process of decision making

While people are clearly the most influential factor on young people's post-16 and post-18 decision making (see section 6), understanding the process of decision making by young people is important and will be useful to inform effective planning of interventions. We found an incremental, step-by-step approach to decision making which may be at odds with the pressure to make decisions that commit to a direction of future study e.g. Year 9 options.

5.1 Educational identities: academic or vocational learners?

This research found that defining educational identities and making choices about progression is an incremental process for many young people. About two thirds of the students interviewed did not want to commit to describing themselves as following an academic or vocational route. This may be, as Beck et al (2006, p675-6) found, because young people want to postpone the

decision making process – possibly because they have insufficient information, or as Moogan et al (1999) suggest that students adopt a step-by-step approach to decision making.

Students perceived vocational courses as being most suitable if you like working with your hands or being creative, or have a particular career in mind. They variously perceived academic courses as ‘leading to a qualification’ or being related to higher study. Batchelor (2006), writing in the context of a post-1992 university, notes however that higher education institutions promote their vocational and labour market outcomes (at the expense of other less instrumental outcomes of higher learning). Thus it may be that students are less aware of a sharp distinction between vocational learning and employment routes and academic learning and more esoteric outcomes.

This process of defining educational identities starts in school and continues post-16 as students consider and make decisions regarding future options. The young people in our focus groups describe a process of reflecting on how they like to learn, what subjects they enjoy, previous examination and coursework success. In addition they have an emerging knowledge of different qualifications and the range of possibilities that educational success in those could bring.

“I am in-between academic and vocational. I like being hands on and enjoy it and do well, but I did pretty alright in my GCSEs, I got higher in some than I expected. I think I can get further doing academic courses. I am not sure what I want to do next. If I pass all of them I might consider higher education. That is why I took four subjects, to keep my options open. If I do decide to go to work I can do more vocational subjects at night.” (student H)

Of the students in sixth form colleges and schools about a third report that they had always been interested in an academic route and perceived themselves as academic students. They defined this by their choice of courses and the qualification; this group were all studying for A levels.

“I chose an academic route because I am not really a practical person. I have chosen academic subjects, economics and politics, because that is what I am interested in and what I want to study at university.” (student B)

“I see myself as an academic apprentice. I am here because I want to be here, to work hard and get qualifications to go to university.” (student L)

5.2 Visualising the future: influential factors

While people, and especially family members and teachers have a strong influence on the actual decisions made by students (see section 6) this incremental awareness of the necessity of making decisions is influenced by students visualising what they would want for themselves in the future and these factors do have an influence on post-16 choices and particularly short term choices.

Factors that influence post-16 choices are rooted in future ambitions for a financially rewarding career and existing knowledge of subjects and courses they are already aware of. Factors visualising future prospects were the most frequent responses when asked which is the most important factor: future career ambitions was most influential (26.1%) followed by wanting higher future earnings (23.2%). Continuing with subjects students enjoyed was the next influential factor (15.6%). Reasons given for this included wanting to study the subject, that enjoyment of the subject would increase the likelihood of doing well, and to use the subject to get a job that they would also find enjoyable and fulfilling.

These findings correspond with earlier research (Glover et al 2002, Wingate 2004. Francis 1999, Barrett 1999, Moogan et al. 1999, Sutton Trust 2002, Connor 2001, Moor et al. 2004, Beck et al 2006): *“The young people responding to our survey indicated that the long-term developments in their life were important and were being considered. The majority of all our respondents (87%) strongly agreed or agreed that ‘choosing a career with long-term prospects is very important to me’.* Beck et al 2006, p674

Other research shows that consideration of HE can be influenced by how students visualise their futures. Hatt et al (2007) report that most students from under-represented groups base decisions about entry to HE on whether it will help them achieve their career aspirations. Batchelor (2006) notes how higher education recruitment advertising promotes and valorises labour market outcomes. Interestingly, Sutton Trust research (2002) found that a primary reason cited for not continuing in education was “not needing to achieve a degree qualification in order to pursue their chosen career”.

5.3 Qualifications and current choices

Students were studying for a range of academic and vocational qualifications, as listed in table 5. Some students following vocational courses were uncertain of the range, names or level of qualifications that they were studying towards and they described feeling confused by the array of qualifications on offer. Response to qualifications currently being studied for was also contradicted by information supplied by staff and by the number of students actually recorded as following apprenticeships (111). In some cases this may be due to students seeing themselves as primarily as employed rather than students. In addition professional qualifications were gained alongside NVQ / BTEC qualifications while following similar coursework.

Table 5: Qualifications currently studying

Qualifications currently studying	Total of each qualification studied
NVQ Level 1	5
NVQ Level 2	72
NVQ Level 3	27
AS Level	208
A Level	223

Apprenticeship	24
BTEC	119
GCSE	53
Other Professional	36
Key Skills	11
Other (sports, leisure related)	15

5.4 Consideration of alternatives

When asked about choosing their current qualifications over other alternatives most students clearly made choices that they felt were more beneficial to them for future study and for future work.

'Because I could do better with BTEC'

'Because I really want to become a mechanic.'

'I decided I wanted to leave school and earn money and learn at the same time.'

'I decided staying in school was best option.'

The suitability of the course to the students perceived personal needs and want were cited as a reason for choosing what was best for them. In many cases this choice was supported by an 'advisor' who helped them identify their learning styles and realistic options.

'AS and BTEC were more suitable for me.'

'Because I found this IT practitioners course which lead onto what I wanted.'

'Certain subjects interested me more.'

'I didn't have the appropriate GCSEs. I have worked my way up from level 1.'

Being uncertain about own capacity was a feature for a few students choices due to pervious underachievement or lack of confidence.

'Not sure of capacity because I couldn't do all of them because I didn't get the grades.'

'Because I don't think I could achieve most of them.'

Lack of information on availability of course or progression routes was a feature in decision making.

'The availability of apprenticeships limited.'

'I don't know what the other qualifications are.'

'I couldn't find an apprenticeship or employment at my age.'

6. What influences choices

6.1 Decision making: influential people

People (particularly family networks, teachers and friends) are the strongest influence on young people's decisions about both post-16 and post-18/ next steps progression as our research and others have consistently shown (Moogan et al. 1999; Purcell et al. 2007; Doherty et al. 2007, Greenbank and Hepworth, 2008).

Our findings (Table 6) illustrate the specific and differing influence of family networks, teaches and staff, and friends, careers advisers and other professionals, other people known to them on decisions at post 16 and post 18. For example while friends influence students 'a lot' they are not the most influential group of people. The influence of employers for post 18 decisions comes into play for students who are working and studying. There is an increased influence on post-18 decisions by AHGTM staff and students met during an activity such as campus visits – as they are more clearly linked to their impending decisions.

Many students reported through the questionnaire and focus groups that they made decisions themselves without reference to others either because they had made up their mind or feel they didn't have any one particularly to discuss this with. This finding about self-reliance warrants further research.

"I weighed up each option thinking "is the most suited for me and the best?"."

Table 6: Influential people

Influential people	Influenced Post -16 decisions 'a lot'	Influenced Post -18 decisions 'a lot'	Most influential person on post-16 decisions	Most influential person on post-18 decisions
Family	46.3%	58.8%	59.5%	57.7%
Friends	17.8%	28.5%	8.8%	6.3%
Teachers	27.8%	34.8%	14.2%	7.5%
Careers/ other professionals	18.2%	16.4%	2.4%	0.4%
AHGTM Staff	3.2%	5.8%	0.3%	
HE or FE Student met at activity	4.3%	11.4%	0.7%	0.4%
Someone known to you accessing HE	16.1%	17.2%	1.4%	0.4%
Employer	-	11.6%		
Other (majority of examples were 'me/ myself')			12.8%	8.4%

6.1.1 Family networks

Both the questionnaire and the focus groups suggest that the influence of parents is a strong factor in supporting students' decisions on educational pathways at both post 16 and for continuing study beyond 18.

In the questionnaire respondents were asked who were the most influential people on making choices about post 16 progression - 59.5% reported family members, including mums, dads, grandparents, cousins and siblings. Reasons range from giving advice and helping with study, talking through the options and explaining the benefits of further and higher education. General support and encouragement to carry on in education and to get a good job was the most cited description of how family members supported students. This kind of support revolves around emotional support and encouragement to stay in education particularly if they have not got a job to go to at 16. For most students their parents have little preference on whether the students should follow a vocational or academic route but that they should choose something they like and that will lead to a job that they like.

"I visited open evenings with my parents. They say they will support me in whatever I want to do, if I want to carry on to study or if I leave after this and decide to get a full-time job. We talk about the kinds of jobs I could do if I focus on one subject or another but there is no pressure from them either way" (student E)

For post 18 decisions 57.7% of respondents reported family as the most influential people. Again this influence was drawn from a wide family network and includes parents, carers, grandparents, siblings and cousins. As for post-16 decisions support is clearly perceived as general encouragement and some pressure to succeed, access to knowledge of the system (especially from those currently in higher education) and an opportunity to draw on the work and life experience of the family network.

The literature suggests that social class plays a key determining role in the decisions young people make about post-16 and post-18 progression. For example, some studies have indicated that young people from higher social classes are more likely to access prestigious subject areas within tertiary education (Davies and Guppy, 1997; Van de Werfhorst, Kraaykamp and De Graaf, 2000). While other studies have pointed out that working class students tend to study in less prestigious institutions and to choose more vocational subjects (Forsyth and Furlong, 2000). Iannelli's (2007) analysis of participation in higher education found that participation in vocational subjects has been increasing, suggesting that working class students are more likely to opt to study these subjects (p323 – 326).

In Batchelor's study (2006, p233) students reported that parents encouraged them to pursue vocational routes in order to achieve secure, highly paid employment opportunities. And Hatt et al (2007: p300-301) found that young people whose parents had no experience of higher education were more likely to study for vocational qualifications than peers from families with prior HE

experience. Rather cynically Van de Stege (2003) says: *'We know that the learning at work route for young people is without esteem altogether. It is a fact that employers, owners of SMEs [small and medium enterprises] and teachers would never register their own children for this route'*, thus reinforcing the idea that middle class learners tend to opt for the academic route.

6.1.2 Teachers, Tutors and staff

Teachers, tutors and staff including careers advisors and mentors (including Aimhigher staff) are also strongly influential but more so at pre-16 than at pre-18. For post-16 decisions 16.9% reported staff, the majority of these being teachers as being the most influential. For post-18 decisions only 7.9% of students noted teachers, tutors and other staff as being the most influential. Support from staff is in the form of information, advice and guidance, encouragement as well as putting on some pressure to do well academically.

From pre-16 days at school many students identified one teacher who was generally inspiring and encouraging to students in helping them focus on what they could gain by staying on at school and to consider subjects that they enjoy. Teachers helped students to see the benefits of staying on and the possibility of higher education, helping students realise their potential and strengths and encouragement to achieve the best they could.

"Mr X helped me decide what to do with all of the information they gave me and told me what to gather."

Teachers who had recently graduated are also seen as good sources of information and help describe what college is like. Other influential people are graduate mentors especially where access to them is available to all students rather than a few. Their support is most appreciated in a personalised approach to making decisions and in helping students make realistic choices backed up by personal planning.

"Go to your mentors and ask them for help. They are really helpful in getting you to think things through and set aims for yourself." (student I)

Careers and other professionals helped specifically by locating specific courses or work placements and by giving advice on courses, requirements and suitability. For some students advisors provided intensive help for example to get a 'second chance' opportunity after not doing well at GCSEs and for others provided general information and advice for the future. (This is discussed further below in relation to the role of information, advice and guidance, see section 6.3.)

"Connexions helped me to make the best decision and listened to what I wanted to do."

While students note the influence of teachers on their decision-making, the literature suggests that teachers may be biased about vocational and academic routes, and this may influence the ways in which they guide young people. Greenwood (2004) notes that A-levels are typically viewed as the 'gold standard', accorded a high level of kudos and seen as attracting the brighter students. In contrast, vocational and work-based learning routes and qualifications are often devalued, viewed with less esteem, and perceived as being for the less academically able (Raffe et al., 2001; Conlon, 2002; Connor and Little, 2005; Hayward et al., 2005; DfES, 2005b). Connor and Little (2005) remark that, unlike the A-level, vocational qualifications are less often seen as a progression qualification and hence are not as commonly promoted by schools as a route to university. They are often seen as being related to the workplace rather than as a route to higher-level education.

Edwards et al (1997) suggest that attempts to promote parity of esteem between academic and vocational routes will "have little impact unless they can change the underlying assumptions about the kinds of young people for whom the different tracks are appropriate" (Edwards et al., 1997 in Raffe et al., 2001: 175).

6.1.3 Friends

17.8% and 28.5% reported friends influencing 'a lot' their post-16 and post-18 decisions respectively. They are considered 'most influential people' on their post-16 and post-18 decisions by 8.8% declining to 6.3% of respondents respectively.

The literature suggests that peers exert a certain amount of influence over the decision to remain in education, particularly post-16 (Thomas et al. 2001, Thomas and Webber 2001; Doherty et al. 2007), and also over the choice of subject. Our focus groups highlighted students' recognition of peer group pressure and a gradual move away to more independent decision making while still sharing information about colleges, courses, application processes.

Friends can be both a positive and negative influence on students. On the positive side, support involved being able to talk to someone in the same situation, sharing information and gaining advice. This is particularly valued if friends have already been through the application processes, are already doing the course and could describe what 'uni' was like, or who could visit colleges with them.

Most of the strongest comments about friends being a negative influence and distraction came from those who had stayed on initially in school sixth forms and then decided to study at college, as this was included in their reasons for changing location of study. The majority of respondents displayed an emerging realisation that choices would have to be made on own terms and for their own reasons to pursue the options they wanted to.

“Follow your passion. Choose the subjects that you enjoy and make that the real reason for staying in education, not just follow what your mates want to do.” (student P)

“Staying with people you know at school, teachers and especially friends is good as you don’t have to worry about making new friends and fitting in. You fit in already. You can concentrate then on what you have to do.” (student M)

“I wanted a change of environment, didn’t wanted to be distracted by mates. I did ok at school but could have done better.”(student B)

6.2 Decision making: influential activities

When students reflected back about activities they had experienced at school some students said that they knew about Aimhigher but they were unsure if activities they had experienced were organised by Aimhigher or not. Some of the students remembered going on visits to universities and colleges while at school (a few of these were organised by Aimhigher). Campus visits including day visits, lectures and residential visits. Students reported that these were useful for learning about student life, what it could be like to live away from home and managing work and study. Some remembered taster sessions and promotional activities by the armed forces.

Once students were in post-16 education, visits to university open days at institutions they may be considering are viewed as important, but not all of the students had experienced this. Some of the students had organised these themselves after getting information from the web on courses and entry requirements.

Many of the apprentices and students in work based learning apart from the NHS cadets had very little opportunity for higher education visits. For those who had this opportunity visits had been organised as part of the course they were studying. The most useful was one were the taster sessions were related to courses being studied at school or college, meeting specialist staff related to their career and where there was information on both courses available at higher education and careers that these might lead to.

“We have visited the colleges and it has helped me try out new areas and talk to students doing the course about how they find it.” (Student V)

6.3 Decision making: Information, Advice and Guidance

Students used a wide range of source of information, advice and guidance for making a decision to continue in education post-16 and post-18. These include websites, information leaflets on qualifications and levels. Connexions / careers advisors are mentioned as the most frequent starting point for signposting to information and advice. They provided information on courses

and opportunities, helped them apply to an appropriate course and supported them to make decisions suited to what qualifications they have. Most of the follow up work is done by students themselves in discussion with influential people (family, teachers including mentors and careers advisors and friends).

Students accessed information for Post-18 decisions from different sources: 52.9% from school; 49.5% from college; 49.2% from university; 37.9% from careers services; 21.0% from Aimhigher and 20.5% from employers. The web is the most frequently cited method of accessing information on course content and entry requirements for post-18 study for students in all types of post-16 study. In addition descriptions of what it is like at that particular college or university and potential future prospects arising from specific courses are valued.

“Information on what courses are available is very useful to have and you can get it from the web. It is good to have someone to talk it through with though, a teacher or mentor.” (student Q)

“The web gave people’s views and showed job opportunities.”

Printed prospectuses and information on courses were influential in that students used these to find out the details of course content and requirements, to see if they would like what the course offered and to be able to share that information with others.

However for some students in vocational progression routes there are few sources of information, advice and guidance on progression routes related to their career choice (see Section 7.2 Knowledge of progression pathways). Action on Access (2005) note that colleges and sixth forms might be less inclined to offer guidance to vocational students on HE options, perhaps not recognising the changing curriculum of universities and colleges. They note, for example, that despite new and expanded foundation degrees, knowledge of these opportunities is varied and many learners in colleges might not be aware of the various flexible and relevant HE options available to them. Rhodes et al. (2002) found that FE college staff may pass on concerns about HE to their students, even where these were unfounded. Reflecting these concerns, Hesby et al. (1998 in Williams, 2000: 352) suggest that for example, “the GNVQ may become associated with a ‘second class citizenship’”.

Given the influence of teachers on post-16 and post-18 decision making, it may be as well to explore the kind of information, advice and guidance that is being offered to students – and whether this is differentiated according to learner groups (see Preston). Rhodes et al (2002) believe that: *“it is important that college staff are familiar with the current culture and demands of undergraduate study as a basis for advising and motivating their students...”* (Rhodes et al., 2002: 143)

Some students were remarkably self-reliant when they appeared to have little access to people to discuss options with and gathered information that they felt they needed so that they could consider their next steps.

“I would have liked to have known more about college. I arranged a visit here myself after I left school sixth form. I have never visited a uni or FE. I think I should try to do that next year to see what its like. I need to know how to get there, how to fill in the forms. That is my next step. My applications are ok now to apply.” (student C)

7. Progression Pathways

7.1 Perceptions of higher education

There were some differences between academic and vocational students' perceptions of higher education in that those following an academic route were almost certainly thinking of applying to university while many of those following a vocational route were hesitant about definitely saying they would apply. This reflects research which shows only 50% of suitably qualified vocational learners progress to HE, compared to over 90% of all A-level students progression to HE by the time they are 21 years old (Action on Access, 2005, DfES 2000).

For those who were considering applying from either persuasion all had a clear idea of the benefits of higher education for work and life opportunities, and there was a sense of pragmatism about the financial costs.

“There are endless benefits to HE. Job prospects, career opportunities, enhance skills, increase knowledge, mature as a person.” (student B)

“It is an opportunity to learn more about the world and stop being ignorant.” (student O)

“There are costs to HE but the way I look at it you just pay it off gradually. There is more chance of earning enough money to be able to pay it off. But this may put some people off.” (Student K)

“You can work while at college. The image of poor starving students isn't a reality any more because you can get help.” (student L)

The post-16 students who are in work-based learning or apprenticeships tended to view themselves (and are viewed by others) as being trained for employment. As there was little information available to them on higher education (see also Beck et al 2006) many were not considering that option. Of those who could see a possibility (very often influenced by someone known to them) they were interested predominantly in local courses offered

flexibly so that they would still be able to work. Students linked to the health programme saw clear benefits to higher education.

“I can develop an expertise in my field, become a specialist and it means I can always develop in my career.” (student V)

7.2 Knowledge of progression pathways

For some students the range of qualifications and levels can be confusing. The students studying a mixture of qualifications (including GCSE, BTEC, NVQ, AS Level) remain undecided about whether what they are studying now constitutes either an academic or a vocational courses. For students not following the A level only route getting to grips with the range of qualifications and the combinations required for progression to higher education was not especially clear to them. There appeared to be a difference in the range of information and input available to vocational students compared with what was available to the academic route students.

“I am not sure what I want to do next. It was better to go into education if you haven't got a job to go to. I haven't properly thought about next steps yet, I will think about it next year.” (student U)

“We had someone come in to talk to us about what to do after A levels and how to chose a university and what to think about when choosing a course.” (student F)

This reflects the findings of a study in the south west (Hatt et al 2007). They note that those with vocational qualifications are less likely to progress to HE and have more restricted progression opportunities (HEFCE, 2004b; Newby, 2005; Watson, 2005; Connor, Sinclair and Banerji, 2006) and thus have specific information needs: “They want to know about vocational progression and about the labour market opportunities that a degree will help them to access” (p295).

For those in work based learning, all were clearly training for a career. Out of those interviewed only those following a course with a sector specific progression pathway marked out for them were confident of their progression possibilities and opportunities.

“We have guaranteed interviews at two universities if we are successful on this course. I have a range of health subjects to specialise in if I want to continue my academic career. I can carry on working through college and build up my practical experiences.” (student W)

For other apprentices, progression opportunities are not so clear or unknown. Those that did have knowledge of higher education opportunities related to their profession had mostly gained this knowledge from someone known to them who had be employed whilst studying for a degree. However, when asked about potential pathways that may be available to them, many students

had little detail on how they might progress in the future from the courses they are studying now. Vocational learners, particularly those in work based learning, expressed the intention that they would only consider local courses offered flexibly so that they could still continue to work. This lack of specific knowledge of higher level courses and sector specific progression routes including foundation degrees, entry requirements and part time and local options results in a hesitant expression of interest in progression.

“I know someone who studied to be a surveyor while working on the site. I want to get a better job eventually on the site but I am not sure if I can get time off work to study. I have to continue to work so I would have to study part time and in the city centre. I think I am doing alright on this course.” (student X)

Research by Beck et al (2006) suggests that only limited IAG is available to apprenticeship students: *“Overall, relatively few young people had heard about apprenticeships from Connexions (the careers service) and the figures are lower for ethnic minorities than for Whites. This raises questions about whether the service is easily and equally accessible to young people and what information is provided”.* (p680)

The report gives further detail *“Overall, a majority of respondents had heard of apprenticeships but this was far more prevalent among White respondents (74%) than those of ethnic minority background (53%). Only half of the Asian/Chinese and just under two thirds of the Black respondents had heard of apprenticeships. More males (71%) than females (66%) reported having some information on the programme. Although the majority of young people had heard of apprenticeships, the focus groups in England revealed that their actual knowledge was usually extremely hazy. The lack of detailed knowledge is reflected in the fact that 63% of respondents stated that they would like to know more about apprenticeships.”* (Beck et al. 2006)

7.3 Admissions to higher education

Admissions to HE came up as a factor for not considering particular qualifications, with A levels being perceived as the best route and a perception that some universities would not accept vocational qualifications. A concern about the match between post-16 curricula and HE programmes was reported by mentors as well as students. Progression decisions are also influenced by availability of courses and employment and lack of choice or awareness of options.

‘Apprenticeship wasn't for me. BTECs aren't considered by a lot of unis’

‘A levels are what I need to get me into uni.’

‘I didn't know about the other alternative routes.’

There is recognition that there may be prejudice from admissions tutors (UCAS 1996a, p230) and that some admissions tutors have deficit view of vocational students with regards to academic skills to succeed in higher education. However, others view them as coming from a different learning culture, which offers advantages for HE learning (e.g. team work, project work and independent learning). A more positive view tends to be held by admissions tutors “with fewer applicants to choose from”. (Brown et al 1999, p228-9)

The higher availability of places in the HE system is a very important factor influencing the choice of applying for a place in HE (Paterson, 1992) and this may have contributed to creating country differences in this respect. The stronger presence of FE colleges providing HE qualifications (i.e. HNCs/ HNDs) in Scotland has also facilitated the inclusion of larger numbers of working class students. However, Scottish young people from a working class background have also higher chances of entering degree courses than their English counterparts. The greater availability of vocational routes within the HE system in Scotland, at both sub-degree and degree levels, may explain country differences in HE participation rate of working class students. (Iannelli 2007, p328)

7.4 Future plans

The questionnaire showed positive responses to future plans for continued study at university with 68.9% saying they would definitely or probably consider studying at university, and 12.6% saying they would definitely or probably consider studying at FE College.

29.4% would consider studying within Greater Merseyside, 39.4% would consider studying within the northwest and 18.4% would consider studying in the rest of the UK. 2 students are interested in studying in other countries (France and Spain).

Students mentioned nearly 300 subjects of interest for future study. The range of qualifications students are interested are detailed in table 7.

Table 7: Plans for post-18 education, training or work (number of students)

Plans	Definitely	Probably	Maybe	Definitely not	Don't know
Degree	63	52	69	48	77
Higher National Certificate	19	49	104	46	80
Higher National Diploma	30	56	105	38	74
Foundation Degree	30	56	99	39	73
Other vocational training	9	30	96	78	79
Work-based learning	41	61	74	65	59
Advanced	45	30	68	94	67

Apprenticeship					
Other (Masters Degree)	1				

78 (17.3%) students said they were not considering further education or training immediately after this course. The majority of reasons were related to having or seeking employment, a small number of these were related to careers in the armed forces. A small number had no idea what they would do next.

8. Supporting vocational progression routes

The kinds of information, advice and guidance and supporting activities students said they would find useful grouped around several categories and illustrated by students' comments. The literature strongly suggests that students need better IAG, especially with regard to vocational routes. Staff development is key here too, as many will not have experience themselves of vocational progression routes and will need support to use information. Training and support especially in relation to the new 14-19 Diplomas was a feature of staff interviews.

8.1 Support identified by students

Guidance:

Teachers guidance; Good advice on my qualifications; Alternative courses and benefits; How to reach my aim in life - Someone to talk to about what I want to do and how to get there; What options you have at 18 for you if you don't wish to do any more studying; One on one conversation; Opinions of others.

More and specific information is required about vocational routes by those providing guidance. Much of the literature notes the lack of IAG relating to vocational pathways. *"Since those with vocational qualifications are less likely to progress to HE and have more restricted progression opportunities (HEFCE, 2004b; Newby, 2005; Watson, 2005; Connor, Sinclair and Banerji, 2006), these learners have particular information needs. They want to know about vocational progression and about the labour market opportunities that a degree will help them to access. The tracking study found that despite a high level of awareness about HE in general, information about local or vocational opportunities was less well understood. Only 45 per cent of the questionnaire sample had heard about Foundation Degrees while only 29 per cent appreciated that HE courses were available in FE colleges."* (Hatt et al, 2007: p295)

This confirms the findings of other studies (Connor et al., 2001; UCAS, 2002) that the provision of information about post graduation employment is not

meeting young people's needs and "points to an area where Aimhigher can fill an information gap" (Hatt et al, 2007, p295).

Careers

Careers options; Potential jobs; Potential earnings; Future employers in the areas I am interested in; List of all jobs and basic wages, qualification needed and examples of tasks within the job; Employers advice and experience; Work experience

Beck et al (2006) found young people need more information to help them compare work-based pathway with full time education. *"The lack of information about the labour market as well as specific occupations was a central theme to emerge from the empirical work conducted. Our findings support Francis's (2002) research, which showed that whilst girls' occupational choices have become more ambitious, both girls and boys are starved of the precise information they need to place their choices in the context of the realities of the labour market."* (Beck et al .2006, p680)

The research of Beck et al. (2006) describes careers information and provision of guidance as central in supporting young people's lack of knowledge. *"In this regard, the young people in this study were usually aware that this type of provision should be available at school. Four sources of provision were mentioned by young people: careers lessons usually 'delivered' as part of the Personal and Social Education (PSE) curriculum in school; through a teacher with responsibility for careers advice; through visits from Connexions and individual appointments with Connexions advisors; and via events such as careers evenings. Our evidence indicated that the availability and quality of careers information and guidance was patchy, and dependent on the ability and willingness of individuals to dedicate time and interest to this area of young people's development. Problems with all four types of provision were mentioned."* (Beck et al. 2006 p 680-1)

Course and college information

College choices; Course information ; Courses and entry requirements; Cost of going to college and grants; More info on securing a place at uni apart from getting good results; Success rates of people who have graduated from uni and increased chance of good job with better qualifications.

Several pieces of literature highlighted particular issues pertaining to the provision and dissemination of advice for vocational learners and make recommendations as to the characteristics that effective guidance and information might have. Some of these include:

- Targeted information:
Rhodes et al. (2002) note that advice and support should be matched to students needs and tailored to individuals so as to overcome differing experiences (e.g. related to the discipline they study).

A study by UCAS (2002) also recommended providing information tailored to the needs of specific student groups.

- High quality information:

Following a study of under-represented groups in higher education institutions (HEIs), UCAS (2002: 29) recommended that HEIs need to ensure that pre-entry information provided is of a reasonable quality and not just “promotional gloss”.

- Provide details:

Noble and Lynn (2003:226) cite the Scottish Council for Research in Education in pointing out a number of areas which should be included in pre-entry guidance:

- “Comprehensive description of each subject;
- Consideration of suitability of the course in relation to the applicant’s experience and goals;
- The entry qualifications and an idea of whom the course is intended for;
- A discussion of the workload and how it would fit in with the applicant’s other commitments;
- The type and frequency of assessments;
- Lists of recommended reading;
- A staff contact name and telephone number;
- Term dates;
- Costs;
- Career counselling;
- Information about alternatives;
- The opportunity to speak to former/current students.”

Benefiting from others’ experiences

First hand experience from students who have done the course; Visits to courses; Talks with universities; Leaflets and maybe a typical day on the course you're thinking of continuing to; Talks with employers and employees in areas I like.

The study by UCAS (2002) found that it was perceived that support for ‘non-traditional’ learners entering HE was inadequate. It described a need to provide pre-entry support and identify gaps in the transition experience, including:

- Pre-entry and early entry programmes;
- Mentoring;
- Open days/interviews at different times;
- Developing protocols (targeted and specific) for pre-entry groups.

A study by Fitton (2001) of the intended destinations of a cross-section of FE college Level 3 leavers from four Hertfordshire colleges found that progression rates to HE (both intended and actual) varied according to programme area, course and group. Responding to this, the study noted in

particular, that certain courses would benefit from specific targeting with regards to support to widening HE opportunities, perhaps through:

- Staff development for vocational tutors on HE;
- Collaboration between FE and HE tutors in each discipline area to explore existing progression routes;
- Developing bridging programmes to help these students progress to HE.
- Raising student aspirations;
- The provision of clear, easily accessible information on HE finance.

8.2 Support and role for AHGTM identified by staff

Staff development

“I would like to offer to the vocational students the supports that are given to the A Level students, such as graduate mentors, targeted activities including access to people who understand vocational progression routes.”

“It is really important to support tutors themselves, some of whom have no experience of higher education and may not be aware of the opportunities. The criteria for success is getting young people into employment as part of or straight after this course.”

“The 14-19 Diplomas could end up as a two-tier education system. I would like to see workshops in schools with form tutors so that they can give clear advice and guidance on all progression routes and not just the straightforward A level route.”

UCAS (2002) recommended making staff development a formal requirement for all admission tutors and introducing staff development for those who advise on HE admissions in local schools and colleges.

The Schwartz report recommends, among other things, an admissions system in which:

- Universities and colleges should provide the information needed by applicants to make informed choices, e.g. the institution’s admissions policy, criteria for admission to courses, weight given to prior academic achievement etc.;
- Information should be given about the entry qualifications of applicants accepted on each course;
- Assessment methods used should be reliable and valid;
- Barriers are minimised for applicants, this includes a mention of barriers to means of assessment and the type of qualification the applicant has (e.g. vocational and academic).

Sinclair and Connor (2003) make similar recommendations to Schwartz, including:

- Encouraging applications from applicants with vocational qualifications;
- Disseminating information on admissions, including Entry Profiles;

- Disseminating of good practice on fair admissions;
- Providing staff with knowledge and skills to implement fair admissions.

UCAS (2002) recommended developing ways to evaluate guidance provision.

AHGTM future role

Staff discussed a number of areas where vocational progression routes could be embedded at every stage of the progression curriculum and to be supported by staff development discussed above. Given recent announcements regarding the next stage of Aimhigher funding there was a sense that although there would be little time for innovation there is an opportunity to refocus some of the work and target resources at key areas using expertise and resources already developed. The key ideas that arose would need further discussion within the partnership but include:

- Targeted focussed interventions: work with young people over time to provide IAG and supporting activities that help them at key transition and decision making periods.
- Include vocational progression routes at every stage of the progression curriculum, not just the A level route, start young, and include in information to parents.
- Support specific groups of young people such as disabled young people to access IAG on vocational progression routes and access relevant work placements.
- Career Champions and clear real life vocational pathways: describe these more clearly and enable young people to access 'people like them' who have followed a sector specific vocational progression route.
- Staff training: building understanding of vocational progression routes among those advising students. Not just printed materials but workshops to support staff or key staff to act as a resource to others.
- Employer liaison and work placements relevant to young people's current interests. Strategic work across the partnership through the Lifelong Learning Network, training providers and Union Learn.

We compiled a short descriptive review of interventions that support vocational progression routes which may be useful (Appendix 4) and a short list which could form the basis of an audit of AHGTM vocational progression routes interventions (Appendix 5).

9. Research Conclusions

Recognise that young people are not explicit about the vocational / academic divide.

Students want to keep their options open and that many make decisions step-by-step.

Recognise the influence of parents on young people's decision making at both post-16 and post-18 options – work with parents particularly pre-16.

Ensure teachers, FE tutors and other staff including graduate mentors in schools, work based learning or colleges are promoting parity of esteem between academic and vocational routes, and providing accurate information to all students without prejudice.

Ensure the gap in IAG for vocational progression routes, and flexible HE is supported through high quality and specific staff development with access to expertise in this area and evaluations of practice and quality of guidance.

10. Recommendations

Recommendations based on the findings of this research suggest four areas of action: effective communication of strategy, ensuring vocational progression routes are everyone's business, staff development activity for effective and accurate IAG and a strategic role for the partnership.

1. Consolidate the strategic role for AHGTM role in supporting vocational progression routes

Strengthen strategic influence by developing the working group's contribution to activities such as the Lifelong Learning Network, acting as advisors on AHGTM funded project work and other projects focussed on working with employers and contributing to policy on vocational progression.

2. Capture and communicate a vocational progression routes strategy

There is a range of vocational progression routes interventions and resources being funded through AHGTM. Communicating what these are and how they link together would strengthen the profile of its vocational progression routes work and would raise parity of esteem.

3. Ensure all AHGTM activities have a vocational progression routes element.

Examples of how a vocational progression can be integrated into generic and specific activities have been highlighted through this research.

- **Guidance and personal planning rooted in awareness of vocational options**

Access to graduate mentors for personal development planning is valued by those following academic routes but there appears to be less access to guidance from graduate mentors for vocational and work-based students for HE progression. Recruitment of mentors with vocational backgrounds could be considered. Tutors while having a great deal of industry experience may not have experienced HE themselves and may have little knowledge or lack confidence to offer HE progression advice and concentrate their efforts on employment. Many of the graduate mentors have followed an academic route and are not likely to have work experience in industry. Improving vocational progression guidance may be achieved through training with tutors, graduate mentors and training providers on understanding and accessing resources to support delivering information advice and guidance on vocational progression routes including part-time and work-based progression opportunities.

- **Clear information on financing part-time and work-based higher education study**

Part of students' hesitancy and tentative inquiry into higher education options is related to imagining how to access and finance further study while in employment. For the health related apprentices this seemed to be articulated as a clear viable option with benefits for career progression gained from both continued work experience and continued higher level study. For other apprentices and vocational areas the part-time availability of courses and financial commitments could be articulated more clearly. While the reality of work based learning depends on flexibility of employers to facilitate workers' continuing study, clear information on the current picture regarding finance of part time study would be helpful.

- **Clear real life examples of vocational progression pathways**

Being able to see examples of vocational progression routes in real life contexts is inspiring for vocational learners. Examples that describe sector specific pathways and that include work-based learning and part-time learning routes would be helpful to raise aspiration and motivation of vocational students. Influential media described by students are case studies (on web or printed materials), sector specific career champions and access to higher education staff or students who had themselves followed a vocational progression route.

- **A focus on sector specific support activities**

Support activities such as campus visits, motivational inputs and support for applications would be enhanced by including a strong focus on the range of subjects and careers relevant to the particular vocational group. Success in these activities requires careful and joint planning between the HEI/ College/ Training Provider / School to tailor activities to needs of students. In addition undergraduate ambassadors/ guides who are studying vocational subjects themselves

would help potential HE students to visualise themselves in HE and activities such as master classes with a vocational focus could be planned to make an effective link between vocational level 3 programmes of study and level 4 programmes of study.

4. Staff development on IAG for vocational progression routes with key influencers

There is a role for AHGTM in providing staff development on effective and accurate IAG for vocational progression routes. This could be targeted at Graduate Mentors and Form Tutors in school, Vocational Tutors and Employer liaison officers in colleges and training providers and with HE staff providing outreach activities or admissions information. Staff development should aim to:

- Build expertise in providing IAG on vocational progression routes through influential people close to students.
- Increase the broad understanding of vocational progression routes, part-time study and financing including working with parents, schools, colleges and employers
- Assist in understanding 14-19 Diplomas and implications for student decisions

Appendix 1: Student Questionnaire topics

This questionnaire is being carried out by researchers from Edge Hill University to help Aimhigher Greater Merseyside provide better support to students and young people when considering their future educational and career pathways. The questionnaire aims to find out what factors influence your decisions about post-16 and post-18 learning and progression.

The questionnaire is in four sections. It will take about half an hour to complete.

Section 1 About you

- Demographic information
- Where you are studying
- Employment
- Current qualifications
- Career Ambitions

Section 2 About your post-16 decision

- Influential people and how they helped
- Influential activities and how they helped
- Influential factors and why
- Alternative choices

Section 3 About your post -18 decisions

- Future plans
- Influential factors
- Sources of information
- What other supports would you find helpful

Section 4 Other information

- Socio-economic information
- AHGTM inclusion form

Appendix 2: Semi-structured focus group discussions with students

AHGTM –VL Individual and Focus Group Discussions – Students Mixed vocational and academic groups

Semi Structured Discussion Schedule – young people

<p>Vocational / Academic Choices</p> <p>(Education Identities, factors that influence vocational choices, factors that influence academic choices)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What qualifications are you studying for at the moment? 2. Why did you decide to do these courses? 3. Did you make a distinction between choosing an academic course or a vocational course? 4. Are these courses related to your future career aspirations? 5. Did you think about alternative courses? 6. When did you make your decision? (year 9 options, earlier, after getting GCSE results?) 7. Who influenced this decision? (people from QA) how did they help you? 8. What factors were important for you in making this decision? (factors from QA) 9. Did you have enough information and support at the right time to make this decision? What kinds of information helped? (Info and support from QA) 10. What kinds of activity or organisations helped? (Organisations from QA) 																		
<p>Views and knowledge about higher education</p> <p>(Do vocational / academic students perceptions of HE differ? How?</p> <p>Awareness of Progression routes and opportunities</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 11. Do you plan to go to higher education in the future? 12. Why / why not? 13. What kinds of courses are you interested in and why? 14. How have you found out about HE opportunities and courses, including work based learning opportunities? 15. From your current position, can you describe your potential pathway to higher education? (qualifications to take next, information needed, entry requirements, application process) 16. Are there any factors that put you off entering HE? 17. What do you think the benefits of HE might be? 18. Do you have sufficient information and support to make decisions about your next steps / post 18 education? What kind of information and support has helped? 19. If not, what kind of information and support would help? 																		
<p>Aimhigher programmes</p> <p>Supporting interventions for post 16 and next steps</p>	<p>20. Have you participated in any AHGTM programmes? If not – have you experienced any of the activities below</p> <p>21. How did these help you to think about progression opportunities?</p> <table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td>Leaflets / information</td> <td>Study guides</td> <td>Visits to college, HEI</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Visits to employers</td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Mentoring</td> <td>Career champions</td> <td>Descriptions of</td> </tr> <tr> <td>progression routes</td> <td>DVD s</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Website</td> <td>Specific AH projects</td> <td>Information on</td> </tr> <tr> <td>finance</td> <td>Other</td> <td></td> </tr> </table> <p>22. What supports would be useful to help you decide what to do AFTER this course, for your next steps?</p>	Leaflets / information	Study guides	Visits to college, HEI	Visits to employers			Mentoring	Career champions	Descriptions of	progression routes	DVD s		Website	Specific AH projects	Information on	finance	Other	
Leaflets / information	Study guides	Visits to college, HEI																	
Visits to employers																			
Mentoring	Career champions	Descriptions of																	
progression routes	DVD s																		
Website	Specific AH projects	Information on																	
finance	Other																		
<p>What would you say to current Year 9 students</p>	<p>23. Knowing what you know now, what would you say to Year 9 students now?</p>																		
<p>14-10 Diploma?</p>	<p>26.. Have you heard about the new 14-19 Diplomas? What do you know about them?</p> <p>25. What role does a work placement have in helping you decide what to do?</p>																		

Appendix 3: Semi-structured discussions with staff

Telephone Interviews – Key Staff from Partnership

The interview is in relation to the AHGTM research project 'What influences vocational learners' being carried out by the Widening Participation Research Centre, Edge Hill University. The project is focussed mainly on young peoples views around factors, people and activities or organisations that support them make decisions about post-16 and post-18 options. A survey of over 400 young people has been carried out with learners in schools, academy, FE college and work based learning.

I am contacting partnership staff with a view to discuss with you your opinion particularly on activities that support vocational learners provided by the AHGTM partnership, your views on the 14-19 and implications for the future for AHGTM.

1. How would you describe AHGTM strategy for vocational progression routes?
2. What do you know of AHGTM current work in the area of vocational progression routes?

IAG website	DVDs	Information / prospectuses
Visits/ promotion	Progression planning with students	
Describing progression pathways		
Visits to employers	Career Championing	
Support for staff (toolkits)	Info for Admissions tutors	Other

3. What do you think has been the impact of these activities?

Impact on students	Impact on staff	Information (quality/ quantity)
Activities that particularly work well		Activities that don't particularly work well

4. What do you know about the 14-19 Diploma?
5. What are the implications for the Implications for AHGTM partnership in particular for the 14-19 Diploma
6. Future role of AHGTM in supporting vocational progression routes
Specific activities and interventions? Who should deliver them?
New activities?

7. Anything else in relation to the research project?

Appendix 4: Vocational progression interventions review

Interventions

Identifying and articulating vocational pathways

The 'Building Pathways' project is a Widening Participation project which aims to explore, define, clarify and articulate pathways into HE for those students on vocational post-compulsory courses. It includes the FE Colleges and HEIs in South Yorkshire, as well as colleges from neighbouring areas, and is led by Sheffield Hallam University (Bowers-Brown, 2004).

The project aims to encourage progression from level 3 vocational programmes to HE, across the South Yorkshire area, through clearly mapped pathways. It seeks to develop progression routes into HE for Modern Apprentices in selected curriculum areas and create new and/or enhanced forms of Access to HE programmes (Sheffield Hallam University, 2005).

Developing clear progression routes

Forrest and Gretton (2005) developed a series of progression flowcharts for a selection of course areas, based on an analysis of the vocational progression opportunities offered in the London South area by the nine HEIs and ten FECs involved in Widening Participation procedures and the Aimhigher consortium. The courses were chosen partly because they are most likely to have the largest proportion of non-traditional learners (from a vocational route rather than A-levels), as well as because they have a clear relationship to a vocation or profession.

Following the creation of the charts, they made recommendations aimed at improving the clarity of progression routes for non-traditional learners, including that:

- Subject/job sector flowcharts are provided to the FECs/HEIs;
- Students are interviewed half-way through courses to analyse the effectiveness of their progression route;
- Partnerships between institutions that contribute to progression chains are strengthened;
- Progression models are put onto websites (either institutional or Aimhigher website);
- Case-studies of real examples of non-traditional route progression are provided;
- Progression flowcharts are disseminated both internally and externally to increase awareness.

Improving the transparency of the admissions process

One research project that has sought to address the barriers to participation for vocational learners is the 'Fair Enough?: Wider access to university by identifying potential to succeed' project (Sinclair and Connor, 2003). It specifically aimed to improve the quality of admissions offer decisions by improving the admissions process's transparency and objectivity and, in doing so, widen participation in HE of groups who previously did not meet more attainment-focused admissions criteria.

In order to do this, it examined the use of criteria other than exam attainment in identifying applicant potential, working on the basis that a reliance on exam attainment leads to an over-representation of applicants and students from social classes I and II. It aimed to create a shift in emphasis from past attainment to potential to success on a degree course.

The project chose to develop an additional criteria framework based on the processes used by employers when developing selection criteria for jobs. It project identified several key criteria commonly mentioned linked to success on courses in fifteen disciplines at six HEIs in

England and as student characteristics that lecturers associate with successful performance. These include:

- Self-organisation skills;
- Ability to work independently;
- Motivation to learn;
- Interest in subject area;
- Ability to work with others;
- Intellectual skills.

Additional criteria were identified on particular courses, for example, relating to mathematical and English ability.

It was intended that the six criteria could be used by institutions to:

- Help make decisions concerning borderline applicants;
- Help make decisions regarding those who do not meet offers;
- Make decisions during clearing;
- Develop interview frameworks;
- Measure interview performance of non-traditional students
- Develop entry profiles;
- Disseminate information on admissions requirements to new students, potential applicants, partner schools and colleges and referees;
- Aid the dissemination of good practice in fair admissions.

Notably, as a result of being involved in the project, participating HEIs are undertaking various activities, including:

- Employing a Widening Participation Office to pilot the use of psychometric testing as a way of testing academic potential;
- Producing an admissions pack for faculties to use in helping them encourage applications from a wide range of backgrounds and in making offer decisions to those with low predicted grades who may have the potential to succeed;
- Recognising the need to put more resources into admissions and particularly the use of criteria in making offer decisions.

Removing student pre-conceptions and providing an alternative entry model

The Humberside University¹ 'Access to HE Project' sought to engage Years 9, 10 and 11 students with potential but who would not normally consider HE (Knowles, 1997). The project focused on removing the students' preconceptions about university and university life, undertaking activities such as 'Taster Days', where pupils spend a day at a local university and sample student life, and residential events, where pupils live the communal life of students and spend time with ex-pupils of their school now in/about to enter HE.

In addition, the project sought to provide an alternative entry model other than the standard one which Knowles (1997: 14) equates to:

"running a marathon race which has a high jump at the end of it. The only part of all this effort that counts is the height at which the candidate clears the bar."

Instead, the students in the project are given a conditional offer of a place at the University when they first start to study for exams at age 14. The offer specifies learning goals and the other achievements they are expected to reach by the time they seek entry.

Preparing students for University

The Flying Start Bridging Project run by the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) aims to improve the retention of non-traditional students at the university (Abramson and Jones 2004; 2003). The project explicitly targets students entering with vocational qualifications.

¹ Now known as the University of Lincoln.

The impetus for the project was the higher than average withdrawal rate for those entering with the GNVQ vocational qualification. In 1998-9, the withdrawal/non-completion rate for those students entering the University with an Advanced GNVQ was 36% at the end of year 1, compared to 26% across university as a whole. In light of this issue, one of the project aims targets the perceived academic key skills gap between GNVQ and HE.

The project centres on a pre-sessional residential three-day (later extended to four) summer bridging school, targeted at Advanced GNVQ students holding conditional or unconditional offers for the following September. It was piloted in 1999-2001. In its second year, the project added student mentors who had completed the summer school in the previous year and undertaken Effective Learning module in year one of their degree studies. The summer school introduced students to key skills such as autonomous learning, provided campus orientation, gave information by support agencies, ran exercises to 'break the ice' and encouraged socialising prior to the term started through social programmes. In 2001, the university held an additional Summer School for Advanced GNVQ students coming to UCLan through Clearing. In 2002-3, the project was extended to all students who had accepted either a conditional or unconditional offer by March 2002.

One potential problem, identified by Abramson and Jones, is that the programme may not be effectively engaging with those who need it most. Since the decision to attend is based on self-selection, those who attend the Summer School might be those more prepared to engage in HE.

Raising aspirations and progression rates

Nottingham Trent University has targeted students with vocational qualifications, in their widening participation strategy, seeking to raise their aspirations and progression rates (Wheatcroft and Snodin, 2005). They report the appointment of a widening participation officer, jointly funded by the University and a local FEC (New College Nottingham), to work specifically with level 3 vocational learners in promoting awareness of progression routes, including the Admissions Contact Scheme. Work with vocational learners, as part of its partnership with the local college, includes HE presentations, question and answer sessions with undergraduates, visits to open days, HE information events for students and parents and clarifying vocational progression routes to HE. Parents are involved as there is a concern that all sources of information students receive is clear and accurate.

Providing early advice and guidance

One project reported in the literature (Chapel and Storey, 2004) targets students studying at level 2 from disadvantaged and socially excluded areas (who might not progress to HE). The 'Beyond GCSE' programme worked with two FE partners, to ensure that students working at level 2 had access to education advice to help them consider what to do next.

The programme was one of a number of strands of a West Yorkshire Widening Participation Project; a partnership between the five HEIs in West Yorkshire which sought to widen participation in HE by working with colleges and schools with low progression rates, disadvantaged communities and ethnic minority groups.

The programme involved students in day schools at the School of Continuing Education; visits to departments and first year undergraduate lectures and campus tours. The work of FE staff was found to be vital since, whilst the HE project worker visited all the GCSE groups during their class time at least once and stayed in contact with those who have taken up activities, there was found to be a definite need for regular support for students from college staff.

Chapel and Storey (2004) highlight how this project indicates the importance of support as a context within which efforts to improve progression are introduced. Going further, they state that:

"The project work has shown that guidance is one factor which can bring about changes in direction and subject choice in a proactive manner, this again illustrates the point that learner progression is not always continuous. Many of the students

involved with the project have changed their aims and the focus of their studies as they have progressed. Guidance needs to be ongoing as students considering HE are often going through a process of redefining their personal aims and objectives as well as gaining more knowledge of their options within HE.” (Chapel and Storey, 2004: 5)

Regional Aimhigher projects

There are a number of regional Aimhigher projects which have sought to improve progression opportunities from vocational, work-based and work-related learning, summarised in Action on Access (2005). Overall, the projects seek to address issues of raising aspirations, improving guidance and provision of information about opportunities, developing opportunities, develop new vocational routes into HE through curriculum development, promote vocational pathways, and encourage partnerships between learning providers.

Examples include:

Aimhigher ASPIRE Project:

- *Where:* South East London, London South Bank University.
- *Target group:* students studying for a Level 3 Electrical Engineering course at Lambeth College.
- *Overall aim:* encourage progression by bringing the students to university and showing them the experience.
- *Specific aims:*
 - To give students a feel for university work.
 - To show ‘concrete’ examples of progression – i.e. make it visible.
 - To give students a chance to have any questions/concerns they have about entering HE to be addressed.
 - To raise student aspirations.
- *Intervention:* Electrical Engineering Taster Day in the University Engineering Department. Students were given information about the university; choices of courses; what to expect etc. and then given the chance to undertake two practical exercises. Student ambassadors also provided support and gave an insight.

Aimhigher Bedfordshire and Luton: Next Steps Progression Guide:

- *Where:* Bedfordshire.
- *Target group:* local learners and potential learners.
- *Overall aim:* to improve awareness of the variety of routes to HE (and particularly that there are many alternatives to the recognised A-level route) to all learners, many of whom are unaware of opportunities due to lack of publicised information, in the area.
- *Specific aims:*
 - To provide a response to questions frequently asked by young learners, particularly those from families with no experience of HE.
 - To provide a used tool for learners and their advisors.
 - To be a memory aid for HE admissions staff.
 - To highlight and publicise progression opportunities to those who are not aware of the various paths available.
- *Intervention:* the Next Step Progression Guide – a comprehensive guidance booklet and reference tool. The Guide:
 - Gives information on all routes; both traditional and vocational.
 - Uses a ‘highways’ theme to highlight the numerous ways to reach a certain point – i.e. that there are many routes to HE.
 - Gives equal weight to each of the routes to HE, giving information on (1) the work-based route, (2) the BTEC routes, (3) the GCSE and AS/A2 routes, and (4) the Access route.
 - Presents a number of case-studies relating to these different ways of entering HE, as well as, among other things, information on HE costs and support for students with disabilities.

- Is supported by a lesson structure which has been developed with Aimhigher Careers Advisors.
- *Future plan*: the project aims to create a web-based resource showing courses, modes of study and providers (including FE colleges and the Open University).

Aimhigher Tyne and Wear:

- *Where*: Newcastle FE College.
- *Target group*: Newcastle College – the college represents the single most concentrated cohort of vocational Level 3 students in Tyne and Wear, a high percentage of which are from widening participation groups.
- *Issue*: North-East England has the lowest regional post-16 participation rates in the country and the lowest percentage of the workforce with Level 4 professional, management or academic qualifications. Attainment at Level 3 and progression to HE in the sub-region are below the national average.
- *Overall aim*: to increase progression to a range of foundation degree, degree and HNC/HND courses at Newcastle college.
- *Specific aims*:
 - To promote College HE provision through outreach activity with schools.
 - To work with regional HEI provision.
 - To work with college staff to raise awareness of HE with vocational Level 3 students.
- *Intervention*: the appointment of a HE Vocational Co-ordinator.
- *Future plan*: to set up a student ambassador scheme where current HE students mentor Level 2 students.

Partnership for Progression

In 2002, HEFCE/LSC introduced the Partnership for Progression (now part of Aimhigher) joint initiative, which sought to raise achievement, strengthen progression routes into HE and encourage overall progression (Gibson and Wood, 2004; Percy and Hindley, 2005).

Percy and Hindley (2005) outline details of the Lancashire Aimhigher: P4P scheme, which sought to investigate work-based progression and young unemployed adult progression, through a number of projects. In the initial stages, POLAR (Participation of Local Areas) data, showing maps of participation of young people in HE, down to the level of ward, was used to identify geographical 'hotspots' of low participation in HE. Mapping of vocational progression routes provision was also undertaken.

Appendix 5: AHGTM current work on vocational progression

The Vocational Progression Routes team have listed their interventions and resources offered in a 'Menu of Activities for a Vocational Progression Routes Curriculum'. There are many resources that could form the basis of staff development activities including the Vocational Progression Routes Toolkit.

www.ahgtm.ac.uk

Other activities and resources across the partnership include the following (however more activities and resources will be certainly have been developed)

- Aimhigher DVDs including Aimhigher 4 Vocational Success
- Aimhigher Greater Merseyside Website
- The Vocational Progression Toolkit- Learners
- The Vocational Progression Toolkit for Teachers
- 'It's Right to be Bright' vocation awareness leaflet
- Study Skills Booklet 'Learning to Study'
- Study Skills Booklet 'Learning to Revise'
- 'Brush up your Maths' on-line maths for engineers
- Forensic Chemical Chaos and Micro Mania
- Aimhgher and Connexions Careers information leaflet 'Construction'
- Aimhgher and Connexions Careers information leaflet 'Engineering'
- Aimhgher and Connexions Careers information leaflet 'Tourism'
- Aimhgher and Connexions Careers information leaflet 'Hospitality'
- Aimhgher and Connexions Careers information leaflet 'Creative Industries'
- Primary Posters 'I want to be...'
- Peer Mentoring
- Career Championing
- Ready Steady Cook
- A Sporting Chance Project
- Year 8 Projects

Other vocational progression work is funded by AHGTM

- 'Vocational Highway' with Merseyside Vocational Training Providers
- Vocational progression routes to HE with Union Learn

AHGTM is a member of the Greater Merseyside and West Lancashire Lifelong Learning Network

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