Current Research

College and vocational education is often seen as the natural choice for those students who don't consider themselves capable of Advanced level study. Often, college courses are viewed as being suited to a different type of learner and to be more relevant to a student's future life (Fuller and MacFadyen, 2010).

At Mid Kent College of Higher and Further Education, as at many colleges of further education, a good number of our students lack confidence in their academic ability. This has arisen from their experience at school where they have not done particularly well in comparison with some of their peers. In some students, this may have resulted in lower motivation levels or maybe disengagement from further study.

 One of the two participating groups in this action research study consists of students who arrived at college without the entry criteria for a full BTEC Level 3 Extended Diploma in IT. Most lacked the required GCSE A-C grades in English and maths. These students were placed on the BTEC Level 3 Diploma in IT, the two A-level equivalent version of the same course. The course is assessed at the same level but students study twelve units rather than eighteen in their two years of study. This allows time for improvement of English and maths grades by students who resit GCSEs or take functional skills qualifications. In general the 15 students in this group could be seen as being of lower ability than the students in the other, smaller group who met the entry criteria and were placed straight onto the extended diploma (three A-level equivalent) course.

Additionally, a number of students had under-achieved in the first year of the course for various reasons. These students may now perceive their ability to be low and might, therefore, lack confidence and motivation to achieve at a higher level. For this reason, quality and outcomes are not being measured, only the meeting of deadlines with a piece of work that both student and assessor might consider complete.

Students and employers value the work-related skills developed on vocational courses but as a nation we lack technical skills and the computing subject area requires many technical and complex problem-solving skills to be developed. These skills are hard to develop and student confidence can undermine their levels of motivation.

Student motivation

Research into levels of motivation in students of vocational courses in higher education suggests that students can become amotivated, sometimes as a result of experiences on their current course (Hoskins and Newstead, 2009), and it is worth considering if this is the case for the participating set of students. Hoskins and Newstead (2009) suggested that 'poor feedback and support may promote mediocrity' and that if students perceive tasks to be 'vocationally relevant' then those tasks have a higher value and this can be more motivating. They also highlighted the problem of high workload and its effect on students' tendency to adopt a deeper approach to their learning. This factor must be considered when measuring levels of motivation as there could be a correlation between levels of motivation when a task is being carried out in isolation and when a task is being completed alongside a number of other tasks of equal importance to their success on their course.

These factors are outside the control of the project.   Students in the participation groups had a high workload at the time of the study, due to the time of year it was conducted. Time restraints,

between the commissioning of the project and the deadline for completion meant that it was necessary to conduct the project at this time. Workload factors will need to be accounted for in the findings.

Employer Engagement

Kerr and McDougall (1999) looked at participation in training by employees of small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). They identified a number of barriers to participation in skill development for SME employers and their staff. These included:

- the level of bureaucracy involved
- the lack of available employee time
- costs
- lack of management experience

In a study by Anderson et al (2001), SMEs showed a preference for informal types of training. These were mainly characterised by feedback on work activities, the sharing of experience and social interaction between individuals and organisations. This type of training is manifested in the Digibury format, organised by Deeson-Online[1] which aims to bring together people from the digital creative industries to share experiences and ideas. These events, held in the evening once a month, are also open to students from the University of Kent and from local colleges of further education, further sharing the experience and knowledge.

A different type of training model was illustrated by Johnston and Loader (2003). This model appealed to SME employers due to its short timescale, participants attended a half-day workshop at an educational institution, and its low cost. The cost was kept low by the course provider in a number of significant ways:

- by limiting the course length to one half day
- by opening the course to other interested parties to share the cost
- by delivering the course in an educational establishment rather than at the employer's premises.

The course was also completely stand-alone requiring no further commitment from employer or employee unless wanted.

Lessons can be learnt from these models in terms of the sort of activity an employer, or employees, might be willing to be involved in and how these activities might be of benefit to full-time college students.   If a learning activity is short, has low costs in terms of time and expenses, is open both to employees and college students and does not represent an ongoing commitment, then it may prove attractive to the employer, who might then be more willing to be involved.

The Leitch report of 2006 highlighted the need to make higher education more readily available to the workforce, in a number of different ways. Tallantyre(2010), in response to this, suggested that traditional models, such as full-time study followed by a work placement, study including a work placement, or day-release study as part of a trainee position, need to be replaced by more

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[1] http://deeson-online.co.uk/digibury

innovative, flexible solutions. Tallantyre (2010) also identified a need to deploy forms of assessment perceived to be relevant to work activity.

The University of Derby Corporate (UDC), again in response to Leitch (2006), was set up to create a work-based learning offer aimed at persuading more employers to work with the university. In order to be able to effectively aim its activities at learners in the workplace, the UDC identified that organisational staff were needed at institutional and faculty level and, importantly, at programme level where staff are more able to accurately verify that needs are being met by students and employers within the demands of the curriculum and standards.

The challenge for further education, as full-time participation becomes compulsory until the age of 18, is to bring some of this activity into the full-time classroom, to take some benefits of work-based learning and apply them in a realistic way to the learning of a student cohort that is largely under 18 and therefore is subject to some concerns in terms of child protection where a student spends the majority of their time in the workplace.

In a report commission by the Department for Education, McCoshan and Otero (2003) investigated the view of further education colleges on FE-employer links and found that the main engagement between colleges and employers was through governing bodies. Some colleges have other consultative functions with a permanent staff base, often advising senior management and working at a cross-college level. There was some evidence in a few colleges of small scale ad-hoc, non-continuous activities. It is likely that the small scale activities involve particular sets of students and may be linked to the provision of work-based learning activities at individual course level. The likelihood of employer engagement operating in a form accessible for the full-time 16-19 year old student is very low. Strategies for improving employer links across colleges included increasing the number of staff with 'a remit to link with employers', allowing more flexibility for teaching staff to free time for them to develop employer links and developing and encouraging individuals who develop their teaching in relation to local business. A move away from centralise of the employer engagement function and towards localisation at the point of delivery may be desirable.

I would argue that there is a need to make further education available to the workforce using different models from those in higher education, models that are more education based but no less innovative or flexible. As identified by the UDC, an investment in the placing of relevant, trained staff at institutional, faculty and, especially, at programme level where staff have industry and subject knowledge important to the process. These models would include assessment relevant to work activity and, importantly, of recognised use to the business community.