

Gateway to Higher Education: preparatory course for adult returners

Polly Osborne and Zita Eckett, Southampton Institute, UK

Introduction and Background

Prior to its incorporation in 1989, Southampton Institute's higher education (HE) provision consisted mainly of part-time professional courses, Higher National Certificates (HNCs), Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) and a small number of degrees. After incorporation there was a major programme of course development to cater for full-time HND and degree students. A major strategic objective of the Institute was to encourage participation from all sections of the community, including from under-represented groups. In implementing such an objective, it became evident that support for non-standard entrants was needed, particularly if such groups were to progress successfully through their chosen higher education course. Consequently, the Gateway course was developed in 1992 as part of the Institute's push to assist mature students. For the first four years the course was funded by the then Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). In 1996 Gateway received an award from the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) for Most Innovative Course.

About Gateway

Gateway aims to ease the transition to HE for Adult Returners. Through the development of skills and the opportunity to 'acclimatise' to the environment, it helps students to gain in confidence. The course is offered free of charge to mature students who have accepted a place on a degree or diploma course at Southampton Institute. Gateway has always been delivered during August and September, immediately prior to the start of the new academic year. It comprises four units:

- Personal and Academic Development
- Communication and Study Skills
- Information Technology
- Numeracy

Students who enrol on the course must undertake a minimum of two units. Units are validated by Southampton Institute and are accredited at level 0. Those students who pass at least two units are awarded a Gateway Certificate. Despite its formal status, the course is student-centred and has evolved in line with student needs - within the obvious constraints of time and resources.

The initial unit in Personal and Academic Development is fundamental to the aims of Gateway, so is compulsory. Through this unit students are encouraged to evaluate their skills and to develop sound learning practices. It includes preliminary exercises that students complete at home as well as a brief review at the end of the course.

The other three units are based on key skills required at HE level. Students must take at least one of the skills units, but can do all if they wish.

Quality monitoring

Quality control is effected through the Institute's course monitoring procedures which include an External Examiner and the annual course scrutiny process. The Gateway External Examiner reports have been consistently positive.

Student feedback has always been central to the development of Gateway, a guiding principle which might, arguably, account for the enduring success of the course. Formal feedback is obtained from students each year at the end of the course both through questionnaires and through individual Exit Interviews. In addition, student representatives are invited to Course Committee meetings during the year. The students rate Gateway very highly and generally claim that it boosted their confidence and gave them a head start when they embarked on their degree or diploma courses. The following comments are typical:

“Very helpful, glad I attended the course. Much more confident about starting my degree”.

“I was extremely nervous about starting my degree. Gateway has eased me into studying. I feel more confident now”.

“This course is a must for a mature student returning to Higher Education”.

Position of Gateway within Southampton Institute

Southampton Institute’s mission is to provide ‘Courses for Careers, Research for Results’. The Institute regards widening participation and retention as key strategies in achieving its mission. A key objective towards achieving these strategies is to increase the assurance that students will have equal opportunities in studying at the Institute. To this end, a Widening Participation team, consisting of a central co-ordinator and an officer for each of the three faculties, was established in November 2001. The team’s role is to widen participation in HE, including encouraging mature students to participate in the Gateway programme.

Resourcing the Gateway programme without direct funding from the Learning and Skills Council (successor body to the FEFC) is becoming increasingly difficult, as funds within Southampton Institute for particular programmes at Further Education level are limited. Despite these difficulties, the Institute is very keen not only to continue the programme but to further develop it to aid recruitment, retention and performance of its students.

Statistical evidence shows that the Gateway course does indeed aid retention and achievement for mature students on HE courses. For example, having tracked the students on each year of the Gateway course from 1998 to 2001 who went on to do a first degree, the data shows that Gateway students are approximately 30% more likely to stay and complete their degree compared to mature students who did not take the Gateway course as shown in Table 1 (Appendix).

The analysis also shows that achievement levels for Gateway students in many instances exceed those of the general student population of the Institute. For example, 8% of the Gateway 1998 cohort achieved a 1st class degree compared to an Institute total of 4%. A more detailed breakdown of achievement of the 1998 cohort is provided in Table 2 (Appendix).

Given the contribution of Gateway to equal opportunities and enhancement of the student experience, there can be no doubt that Gateway is a valuable element in the Institute’s portfolio and is worthy of preservation.

Gateway Enrolment

It is an anomaly that with the Institute’s commitment to widening participation and the proven track record of the Gateway programme that the number of students enrolling each year on Gateway has been declining.

Number of students enrolled each year on Gateway course since 1996							
	Summer 1996	Summer 1997	Summer 1998	Summer 1999	Summer 2000	Summer 2001	Summer 2002
Number of students	59	45	42	37	37	35	37

Undoubtedly this is partly due to a reduction in the number of mature students entering HE and to poor marketing of Gateway. But it may also result from changes in student life-style, especially the need for the majority to earn money while they study. In recent years students have suggested a number of reasons why they were not able to do Gateway. The most common ones are:

- Had not been aware of the course
- Received information too late to reschedule other commitments to work/holiday/childcare
- Application to HE through Clearing not completed in time to start Gateway
- Conflict with employment

Where students live and work locally, many are able to continue in employment if the hours do not clash or if the employer is willing to allow some flexibility. Some use annual leave to enable them to attend Gateway classes. Student feedback has indicated that more flexible delivery would make it easier for

them to attend. The enrolment figures are a cause of concern in that they demonstrate that the programme is not as accessible and/or attractive to students as it might be.

Developments

It is within the framework described above that those concerned with the course have been taking a critical look at Gateway and considering how it might be further developed to maximise the benefits. With the focus on securing funding to run the course and ensuring that the course is attractive and accessible to students, actions have been agreed that are outlined below. Where possible, these are being implemented immediately.

Funding the course – the course is run centrally by the Study Assistance team but there has been no specific budgetary provision; consequently its existence is precarious. However, it has recently been agreed with the faculties that, in recognition of its value to their students, they will contribute towards costs of delivery whilst the central planning team continues to seek external funding.

Marketing – the course is advertised as an optional extra that takes place during the summer period. Unfortunately information on Gateway is not always made available in time for students to take up the offer. For 2003 entry the faculties have agreed to assist with targeted marketing to mature students by despatching Gateway information to mature applicants who accept a place on an HE programme at the Institute. It is also hoped that Gateway will be actively promoted by the Admissions Tutors and at Southampton Institute Open Days. With the right information at the right time, more students will be able to enrol on Gateway.

FE liaison – many mature applicants live and study in the local area and would welcome more HE information while at their FE colleges. Therefore, the intention is to supply Gateway information to local feeder colleges, especially those who run Access courses. The Institute's Widening Participation Officers have agreed to assist with this.

Incentives to students - since good performance benefits the institution, it might be cost-effective to reward those who gain a Gateway Certificate. Unfortunately the level 0 credit points awarded for Gateway units cannot be used on degree/diploma courses, so the team is considering ways of providing financial prizes (e.g. book tokens) to those who complete the course. It might even be possible to find a sponsor.

Delivery – to date, delivery has always been between 9 am and 4.30 pm for the first three/four weeks of September, with the skills units running concurrently throughout this period. This inevitably conflicts with some students' commitments to employment and family. Furthermore, the beginning of September may be too early for late applicants to join the course because they are unable to complete the admissions procedures in time. Ideally the course should be offered at different times of year and during evenings as well as day-time but at present the level of resourcing precludes this. However, as an interim measure until direct funding can be obtained to develop the programme, proposals for 2003 entry are that, instead of running the skills units concurrently, one complete unit will be delivered each week prior to the start of the academic year. This will more suitable for those students who only need to take one or two skills units and will also permit late applicants to join in and study at least one entire unit.

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, the course has not received any direct funding since the academic year 1995-96. However, now that local LSCs are permitted to fund programmes that will benefit the local and regional areas, the Institute has recently applied to the local LSC, Hampshire & Isle of Wight, for funding for Gateway. If funding is obtained then the development work described above will become possible and mature students will have a better chance of achieving their full potential in higher education.

Appendix

Figure 1

This graph shows the retention rate of mature students who did not do Gateway (in green) in comparison with Gateway students (in blue).

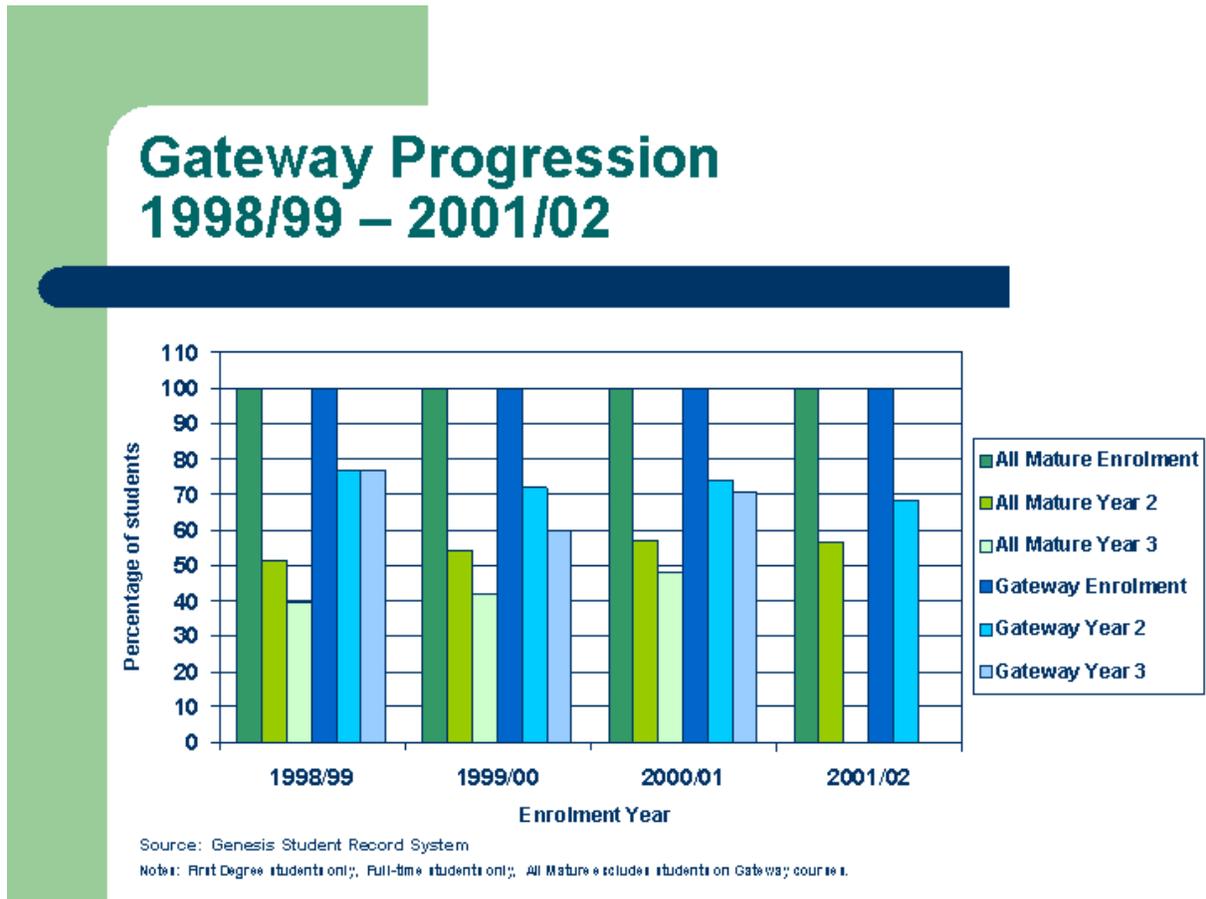
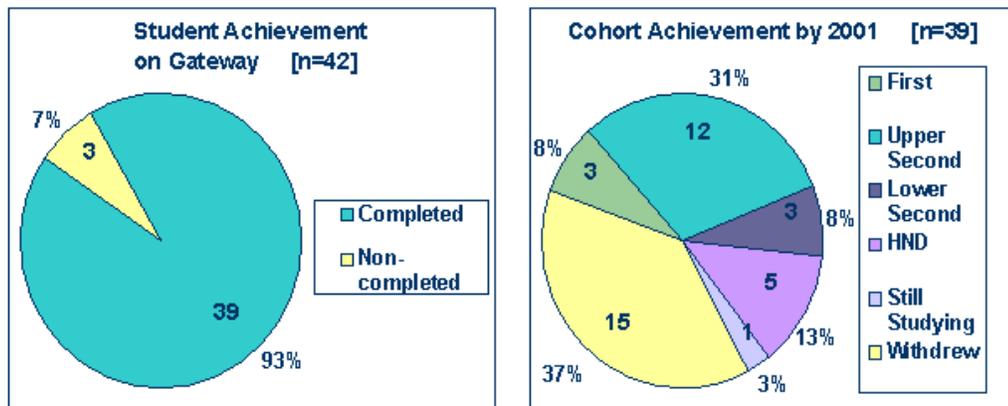


Figure 2

These charts show the achievement of the 1998 Gateway cohort (42 students), initially on the Gateway programme in 1998, and then by 2001 (39 students).

Gateway Programme - 1998



Source: Genesis Student Record System