

Case Study 2 VETNET LLN North East

Background

VETNET LLN (Lifelong Learning Network) is a national network (funded by HEFCE) of veterinary schools, Universities and colleges committed to providing opportunities for students on vocational courses to get into higher education. The North East & Yorkshire Region – the focus of this case study - is managed by Dr. Catherine Douglas at the School of Agriculture, Food & Rural Development at Newcastle University.

Aims and Objectives

The overall purpose of VETNET LLN is to support student transition, improve student success and experience at HE (from under-represented Widening Participation groups), and reduce attrition. More specifically, VETNET LLN aims to:

1. Produce a comprehensive qualification map to clarify existing animal and veterinary related courses available across the country,
2. Develop, through work with institutions, curriculum that will allow vocational learners to progress smoothly into veterinary and applied animal related degree courses,
3. Compile a catalogue of career and professional development opportunities for those working in the animal and veterinary sectors.

As a national network, VETNET LLN is working with institutions to establish progression accords. These clarify routes of progression for learners within and between institutions. Work is focused particularly at the FE/HE interface but will also include the assessment of work place experience as a valid means of entry to HE study.

Linking schools, colleges and Universities

A strong tenet throughout the work of the VETNET LLN is the links it has to partner colleges, schools and universities. Each region has its own partners, and in the North East and Yorkshire, Newcastle University is the regional hub institution. Current partners include: Askham Bryan College; Bishop Burton College; Calderdale College; Craven College, Skipton; East Durham College; Kirklees College; University of Leeds; Newcastle College; Northumberland College (Kirkley Hall); Norton College; Leeds City College; Tong High School; University of Edinburgh and University of Glasgow.

Within the VETNET LLN North East and Yorkshire region, the following activities (among others) are available or being piloted:

- **Residential University experiences (aspiration raising and assessment for entry).** In 2009 three residential taster events took place. The two during the Easter vacation were specifically for students on level 3 vocational programmes (eg BTEC National Diploma in animal-related subjects) who are interested in studying veterinary subjects at University.

The residential experience was designed to give students an overview of the subject and application process, but was also by way of an assessment as those who successfully completed the Easter Schools (as assessed by the veterinary lecturers) will be guaranteed an interview in the next UCAS application round. The summer school at Newcastle University was an aspiration/confidence raising experience for students on a wider variety of level 3 animal-related vocational programmes (eg BTEC National Diploma/ City and Guilds Advanced National Certificate). Along with information on the application procedure, living as a residential university student, it provided an opportunity to explore different subjects through taster sessions.

- **Cave website.** Designed by VETNET LLN this website (Courses in Animal and Veterinary Education) contains a comprehensive database of courses available to potential students, with student profiles, career information and pathways into specific animal-related careers, and informed advice service. It is a vocationally focused added-value, one-stop-shop, UCAS-type site, serving all the applied animal-related courses at institutions across the country.
- **VETNET LLN Focus groups. To survey cohorts of vocational learners to inform general student support / subject specific support to ease transition to HE study.**
- **Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG).** A DVD aimed at vocational learners studying animal qualifications at level 3 (also to be available for parents) and a second DVD aimed at work-based/mature learners studying or who have studied animal qualifications at level 3.
- **Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) or support staff and subject specialist staff at level 3.** Admissions staff from relevant animal-degree programmes have been meeting with personal tutors at local feeder colleges to give advice on the application procedure and build working relationships to open up the lines of communication. Subject specialists from the local feeder colleges have also shadowed some of the first few lectures biochemistry. This subject has been highlighted as difficult in focus groups. Although the lecturer offers additional tutorials, the FE staff are knowable to adapt the emphasis of their curriculum to better prepare students who are likely to progress to HE, some colleges are now running additional tutorials for students.
- **Monitoring student progress the progression accords.** Progression accords are signed between FE and HE institutions to clarify the entry requirements for vocational learners and demonstrate that their qualifications are welcomed. An element of the progression accord is the good practice of monitoring the students once they matriculate. This has been built into the Animal teaching groups regular review meetings. Whereas before problems were only flagged up after exam results in January, lecturers can share information on students earlier and identify trends across modules which may suggest a student may be "at risk" (assessing grades and patterns of late or no submission), mechanisms can then be devised to support the student well in advance of exams.
- **Animal health conference.** This Stage 3 conference has been opened up as an additional opportunity on the HE "open day/experience HE" calendar. Several regional (and national) feeder colleges have invited their students to participate in an event that supports their studies but also gives them an insight into HE in their subject of interest.
- **Pre-application open day.** This differed from typical university/school open days to focus on vocational learners' needs and supporting their tutors in providing HE information, advice

and guidance in synchrony with their timetable of tutorials. The day involved talks and activities and quizzes around finance, HE, UCAS, student talks about a range of animal-related subjects, visits to halls of residence, a lunch to chat to current students about a range of animal related courses available, visit to the farm (which also supported current assignments).

- **Specific transition-related projects.** (see below).

Exploring impact

Specific transition-related projects have been undertaken in this Case study: this work supports the under-represented widening participation group of 'vocational learners' (those who have not taken 'A' levels) and includes:

- **Extended induction.** With the aim of integrating students who live away from University accommodation and who may have an impoverished social experience, this included study skills sessions, and residential study trips with small group projects to enhance course identity. This small group of students are traditionally taught in large interdisciplinary lectures, which limits the opportunity to integrate and bond with their subject peers.
- **Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) project.** As an alternative strategy to large lectures to support transition and support the development of HE study skills of stage 1 students. Stage 2 students support those at Stage 1, the aim being to establish an informal support network.
Improving numeracy competencies of students entering HE – an interactive contextualised IT resource for animal disciplines "**Animal Maths**" contextualises and apply maths to the animal and veterinary related subjects. This resource has a number of uses once in HE, but the primary rationale was to support transition of students moving from further education to higher education who may only have achieved the equivalent of basic GCSE. Lecturers can use this to allow HE candidates to study and improve at their own pace.
- **Animal Uni.** Bolted on to the PARTNERS (see Case Study 2) Bitesize Uni residential summer school – *Animal Uni* – students can find out more about the various animal-related courses available at university, as well as meeting new people and finding out what it is really like to be a university student. This project in 2008 was the first summer school for vocational learners (it has been successfully completed in 2009 with more colleges participating).

Although we were unable to collect fresh data from VETNET participants, there is a growing body of evidence of impact which is starting to emerge. Data is being gathered for the Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) project and the Extended Induction project through questionnaire feedback, focus groups, student marks in exams or relevant assignments. Initial feedback for Extended Induction has been excellent - scoring highest on the University Induction Activities feedback. Student bonding on the course is reported to be much improved on previous years, and student attrition is reported to be significantly less than previous years.

Animal Uni (vocational summer school) has been well received by both students and lecturers who wouldn't usually consider HE as a progression route. As the VETNET Regional Manager reported:

We are dealing with students across a spectrum of aspiration: at one end we have students who may anticipate HE as the next step, their parents/siblings may have gone to university, and progression has always been an option or expectation for them, although the numbers of these students tend to be less in this widening participation cohort [vocational learners]. At the other end of the spectrum are those students for whom HE has never been on theirs/their family/lectures' radar. It is these students who may have ruled out HE with no knowledge of what it entails or the benefits it could confer and they may not consider themselves capable or indeed able to "fit in". It is these students we hope to capture with activities such as Animal Uni, so that they have an informed choice. Animal Uni is addressing the above for the learner and filtering back to their families and colleges.

The residential experience does appear to work well for the VETNET students, and the school is being run again this year. Lecturers of the students who have attended have not only seen students who were not considering HE to apply, an increase in motivation and improvements through the UCAS process but also an improvement in current academic effort and attainment. Due to the success of this "strand" in Bitesize Uni, a STEM version is being run this year.

Conclusions

The VETNET LLN programme is clearly an example of a multi-faceted approach to the issue of outreach, transition, induction, and preparation for University life, with a specific remit for vocational and/or Widening Participation learners. It links effectively with existing transition activities such as the PARTNERS programme. Some activities fall loosely into the 'generic' category where students can visit the University generally, but are always specifically focused towards animal-based courses.

What makes a difference?

- VETNET LLN initiated and funded activities within Animal Science are a good example of an initiative which offers a programme of activities and opportunities, from generic to individualised support.
- It offers 'real' experiences of University life, from the practical (living in halls) to the pedagogical (teaching experiences).
- It links effectively to other programmes, such as the PARTNERS programmes, and adds to these rather than duplicates or competes.
- VETNET LLN aims to support those students who, for a variety of reasons, may have not considered University as a realistic option, and who may not take the 'traditional' route into University.
- The alignment of the level 3 course linked so closely to the degree subject, with large cohorts of potential HE students locally, mean that working in partnership with local feeder colleges to support transition could be a very effective method for recruitment and enhanced retention, compared to the University's central generic engagement with schools offering a wide variety of A levels with students aspiring to a diverse range of subjects at an array of universities across the country.

- These widening participation vocational students have committed their interest to their specialist subject 2 years ahead of most A level students. By adjusting the initial HE curriculum to be more applied even if limited to a small tailor-made transition “add-on”, this will enthuse these learners and assist with retention. Focusing some teaching on these students’ interests in stage 1 of their HE experience, rather than providing a purely academic foundation for future applied study, will enhance their HE experience, support their transition by minimising disillusionment with the subject choice and thus reduce attrition. This model is being adopted in the veterinary curriculum. This pilot within Animal Science forms a workable model within the university’s restrictive timetabling which promotes large-group, interdisciplinary, lecture-style, generic-principle teaching on many first year programmes, which can be an alien and uninteresting pedagogic experience compared to the applied teaching, that these work-place students are used to.