

STAYING THE COURSE: PROJECT RESEARCH SUMMARY

COLLEGE COLLABORATION FUND (CCF) PROJECT WITH ACTIVATE LEARNING,
BOURNEMOUTH AND POOLE COLLEGE AND NEWBURY COLLEGE



CONTENTS

Aims and Objectives	3
Workstream 1 - Research with learners, staff and the wider sector on the issues and solutions for Level 2 retention and progression.	3
Review	3
So how can we turn the tide and improve retention and progression onto higher levels of learning?.....	4
Participant Feedback.....	5
Survey Responses	5
Quantitative Feedback - Careers	5
Quantitative Feedback - Guidance and Support	5
Qualitative Feedback.....	6
Focus Group Responses	7
Student Feedback.....	7
Staff Feedback.....	7
Summary of Research.....	8
Consideration.....	8
Supporting Learners During Induction	8
Ensuring Learners Return After Christmas	8
Helping Learners Prepare for Exams	9
Toolkits.....	10
Supporting Learners During Induction	10
Ensuring Learners Return After Christmas	10
Helping Learners Prepare for Exams	10
References	11
Appendix	12
Analysis of results	12

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of the project was to research best practice sector-wide for retaining Level 2 students and develop resources to support both staff and students to achieve greater retention.

The objectives were to Identify which methods were successful in retaining Level 2 learners, including early identification of most at risk and to collaboratively develop toolkits of guidance and resources to implement rapid and effective actions to retain (**Staying the Course**) Level 2 learners.

The project followed three workstreams:

1. Research with learners, staff and the wider sector on the issues and solutions for L2 retention and progression. (Bournemouth and Poole College (BPC) lead)
2. Collaboratively create high-quality toolkits and resource packs for learners and staff based on research derived from Workstream 1. (Activate Learning (AL) lead)
3. Produce final, versions of the toolkits and detailed report for use by colleges nationwide. (Newbury College (NC) lead)

The project involved the development of three tool kits aimed at supporting both students and teachers on the topic of Staying the Course.

WORKSTREAM 1 - RESEARCH WITH LEARNERS, STAFF AND THE WIDER SECTOR ON THE ISSUES AND SOLUTIONS FOR LEVEL 2 RETENTION AND PROGRESSION.

REVIEW

Student retention and progression are crucial to the long-term success of a Further Education (FE) college, but they are also an important factor used to measure performance and increase funding.

Education Encyclopaedia (2022) defines retention within education by stating:

"Retaining a student is fundamental to the ability of an institution to carry out its mission. A high rate of attrition which is the opposite of retention is not only a fiscal problem for schools, but a symbolic failure of an institution to achieve its purpose."

With every student that withdraws or chooses not to progress, the risk of financial or performance troubles grows. Brunsden (2000) explains that these risks can impact in three ways: waste of resources, effort, and reputation.

There are a number of impacts that link to low retention rates. These are:

- Low self-esteem of students.
- Reduced progression into the next level of education or employment.
- Reduced capability through non-attainment of appropriate qualifications.
- Societal challenges due to unemployment

These findings are echoed in the White Paper, Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth (Department for Education 2021). This paper states that:

"There are currently significant skills gaps at higher technical levels" and "only 4% of young people achieve a qualification at higher technical level by the age of 25" (2021, p.6).

The White Paper goes on to say that:

"Colleges and independent training providers do not have enough support and incentive to offer high-value training and education. Current funding rules encourage providers to put on cheaper and lower-value courses which can be filled easily"

and yet according to the Code Institute (2021, p.6) FE colleges are seen as an integral part of creating the technical workforce with higher technical skills.

"Colleges are deeply embedded in the local community, so they are key in bridging the digital divide and creating the skilled workforce local employers are looking for."

These findings are supported by research carried out by the Southern Universities Network (SUN) and the Bournemouth and Poole College (Smith and McDonald, 2019) which show that most students studying at Level 2 plan to enter the workplace – either directly (21%) or through an apprenticeship (43%) but 41% do not know what career they want to pursue. Of those surveyed 20% were concerned that their academic ability (including maths and English level) would stop them from achieving their dreams.

SO HOW CAN WE TURN THE TIDE AND IMPROVE RETENTION AND PROGRESSION ONTO HIGHER LEVELS OF LEARNING?

For this project we have targeted our Level 2 Learners. All partner colleges have identified lower retention before funding data cut-off date (day 42) and reduced numbers progressing onto higher level qualifications.

Below are the findings of research carried out by all three partner colleges and includes cohorts of students studying Level 2 qualifications in the academic year 2021-22 and tutors responsible for teaching these students.

The research aims to identify the key concerns and issues that impact on student retention and progression and how equipped staff feel to support students around these issues.

PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

At the beginning of the project, focus groups and surveys were conducted with students across the Level 2 cohort from all three colleges to collect their thoughts on a number of topics.

SURVEY RESPONSES

QUANTITATIVE FEEDBACK - CAREERS

- When asked if they had a clear career path in mind, 57% of participants said “Yes”
- When asked if they agreed they knew which qualifications they require to achieve their career goal, 65% of participants said, “*Quite True*” or “*Very True*”
- When asked if they agreed they knew which skills they needed to develop to achieve their career goal, 74% of participants said, “*Quite True*” or “*Very True*”
- However, when asked what they wanted to achieve from attending college, only 38.5% stated employment as an end goal

QUANTITATIVE FEEDBACK - GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT

- When asked if they felt confident in knowing what their options were after their course, 64% of participants said, “*Quite True*” or “*Very True*”
- When asked if they agreed they knew where to find job information and careers advice, only 47% of participants said, “*Quite True*” or “*Very True*”, with 53% unsure where to get help
- When asked if they agreed they knew who to go to for support about next steps, 66% of participants said, “*Quite True*” or “*Very True*”
- When asked if they agreed they knew who to go to for support for challenges in their personal life, 68% of participants said, “*Quite True*” or “*Very True*”

These results demonstrate that approximately 30% of students studying a Level 2 programme are not fully aware of their career options, what support is available and where to go for this support.

Similarly, a similar number of students have difficulty on their course for other reasons. When asked, 21% of participants had not fully settled into college life, 18% did not like their college course and 20.5% of participants agreed that they had thought about leaving their course. More positively, 75.6% agreed that they would recommend their course to a friend.

QUALITATIVE FEEDBACK

Comments were invited in the survey from participants who had expressed they felt like leaving, a selection of these are listed below:

- *"...because I didn't feel that this course nor the future derived from this course/trade was for me"*
- *"...because it is a really difficult course, and you really need to put 100% into everything that you do no matter how small the task"*
- *"...construction course here doesn't include everything I need and want to do in construction"*
- *"...I was struggling to make friends which then made me not enjoy being at college"*
- *"...I'm just quite unsure on what to do in the future"*
- *"...I wasn't sure if it was right for me but then found out it definitely was"*
- *"...because I want to do bricklaying instead of the course I'm doing right now"*
- *"...I was struggling to make friends which then made me not enjoy being at college"*
- *"...being nervous at the beginning of the year made me kinda wanna leave"*

The same students were then asked what made them stay:

- *"...having a supportive tutor trying to help me fit in helped me to stay."*
- *"...because I enjoy the course"*
- *"...I am receiving valuable information and knowledge"*
- *"...I decided to stay on this course because it is my favourite course I really enjoy it"*
- *"...I decided to stay with my course, because I find it very interesting. I love music"*
- *"...I wanna stay because I like my course and improve on my maths skill"*

FOCUS GROUP RESPONSES

STUDENT FEEDBACK

Focus groups were also held with Level 2 students across all three colleges with the purpose of exploring why students leave and what could be done to support them more.

- 27.8% agreed that they had thought about leaving college
- 49.6% had known someone who had left college

When questioned on what they felt the college could do to improve student retention, they suggested:

- lessons should be more engaging
- the college should listen to their students
- they would like more support
- they would have liked more cross college activities and events

STAFF FEEDBACK

Focus groups were also carried out with teachers who teach Level 2 students to ascertain what they believe the main issues are with keeping and progressing students and what could be done to support them. The top four reasons were:

- there is lack of student motivation/commitment
- the students left because they were on the wrong course
- students left because they found the work too difficult
- students did not realise they would have to resit Maths and or English GCSE

Comments were invited from teachers on what could be done to support their students,

- *“...giving us more hours to train students fully rather than maximising teaching hours”*
- *“...staff training in engaging Level 2 learners”*
- *“...celebration of success”*
- *“...give staff the resources to do their jobs to the best of their ability”*
- *“...right student right course”*
- *“...more support with wellbeing”*
- *“...give teachers more time to develop lessons that engage”*
- *“...better advice and guidance before students start the course”*
- *“...teachers and student alike need an enriching environment”*

The main thoughts of teachers focussed on being given more time to teach and prepare engaging lessons, more support for students and making sure students were on the right course for them.

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

The students interviewed discussed their concerns around a lack of clear career direction and knowing where to go to for career advice. Students, therefore, chose a course not to pursue a career but for other reasons. The impact being that over 30% had thought about leaving because they were on the wrong course.

There also seems the need for social and emotional support networks, with levels of anxiety growing due to the pandemic and students finding it difficult to make friends and settle in. College staff need to reaffirm the need to reach out for help before students consider dropping out from their course.

The lack of desire to stay or progress in students was echoed by teaching staff, 18% identified a lack of motivation or commitment from students as a main consideration for students withdrawing, students making the wrong course choice was also noted as a major factor.

CONSIDERATION

Using the research and student voice we identified three key times in the academic year and the key challenges that influence a student and their thoughts around staying the course.

SUPPORTING LEARNERS DURING INDUCTION

At the beginning of the academic year the students must make the transition from school to college and adjust to a whole new way of learning and this brings its own challenges and questions:

- What do I want to do for a career?
- What course do I do?
- Will I have to retake maths/English?
- Will I make any friends?

ENSURING LEARNERS RETURN AFTER CHRISTMAS

The end of the first term can be very busy with assignments due, revision for exams in January and work/social life becoming more hectic due to Christmas. Many students feel the pressure to drop out as employers offer more hours, the extra money being helpful and the stresses from assignments and work take their toll and introduce new challenges. Students asked:

- How do I manage my workload?
- How do I manage my time?
- How can I juggle my working commitments, college, and social life?
- Can I access help with my finances?

HELPING LEARNERS PREPARE FOR EXAMS

Exams are an important element in most students' study and this time of year can be stressful for most. The students face a new range of challenges including:

- How do I revise?
- How do I overcome exam anxiety?
- What support is available and how do I get it?
- What are my next steps?

Having reviewed the results and research, we have identified several recommendations to be developed into Toolkits to support both students and teachers.

TOOLKITS

The project developed six toolkits using three critical academic periods, induction, pre-Christmas, and post-Easter, along with the staff and student voice. Each period has a toolkit for staff and students. Student Toolkits aim to support students during key elements of their college life, and companion CPD Staff Toolkits help teachers understand the pressures students face and how to support them.

SUPPORTING LEARNERS DURING INDUCTION

Student Toolkit

This toolkit focusses on ensuring that the student know what they are doing, what elements are included in their study programme and what the expectations are. It also focusses on allowing them to seek and access the appropriate support including social emotional support, careers advice and tips to help them settle into college life.

Staff Toolkit

This toolkit focusses on how teachers help students settle into college, how they get to know their learners and helping them getting to know each other, early identification of support and if the student is on the correct course for their chosen career.

ENSURING LEARNERS RETURN AFTER CHRISTMAS

Student Toolkit

This toolkit aims to help the students recognise the competing commitments of college life, assignments, and exam preparation against work commitments, financial needs and socialising over the festive period. This toolkit examines how to successfully manage their time, plan and prioritise and make active choices.

Staff Toolkit

This toolkit helps teachers recognise why students leave, the pressures they face and looks at ways in which we as professional educators can support them.

HELPING LEARNERS PREPARE FOR EXAMS

Student Toolkit

The final toolkit focusses on the pressure of exams and assignment deadlines, how to stay motivated, dealing with stress and anxiety and top tips for revision.

Staff Toolkit

The final teacher toolkit focusses on preparing students for exams and assessments. It explores we as teachers can inspire and motivate and help our student's overcome anxiety. There will also be a range of top tips on helping our students plan for exams, revision and assignments.

The toolkits are easily accessible and can be customised to meet your organisational branding and departmental guidelines.

REFERENCES

Brunsdon, V., Davies, M., Shelvin, M. and Bracken, M, (2000). Why do HE students drop out? A test of Tinto's model. *Journal of Further and Higher Education* [online], 24 (30), 301-310.

Code Institute, 2021. *How Further Education meets industry demand for software skills* [online]. Available from: <https://codeinstitute.net/rqf-white-paper/> [Accessed 3 January 2022].

Department for Education, (2021). *Skills for jobs: lifelong learning for opportunity and growth* [online]. London: Department for Education. Available from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/skills-for-jobs-lifelong-learning-for-opportunity-and-growth> [Accessed 3 January 2022].

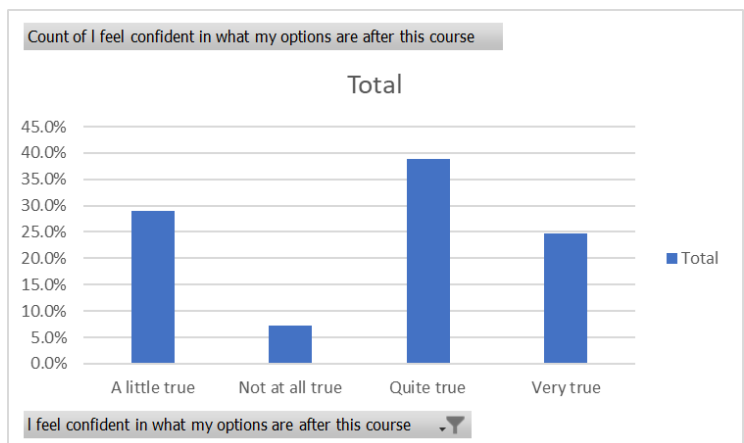
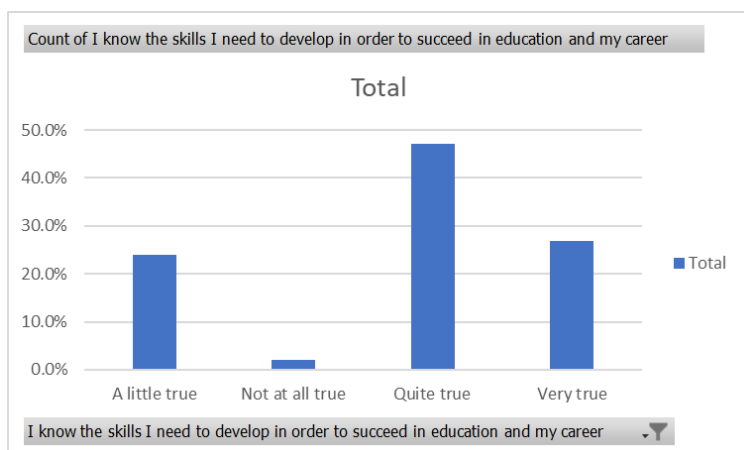
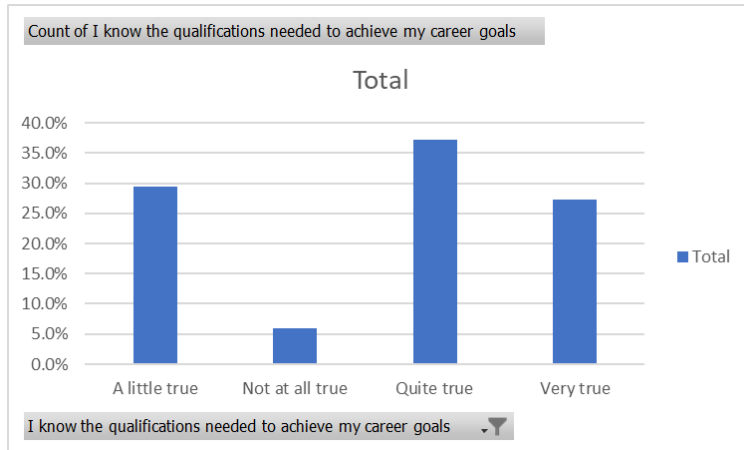
Encyclopaedia Education, (2022). *College student retention: defining student retention, a profile of successful institutions and students, theories of student departure* [online]. State University. Available from: <https://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/1863/College-Student-Retention.html> [Accessed 03 January 2022].

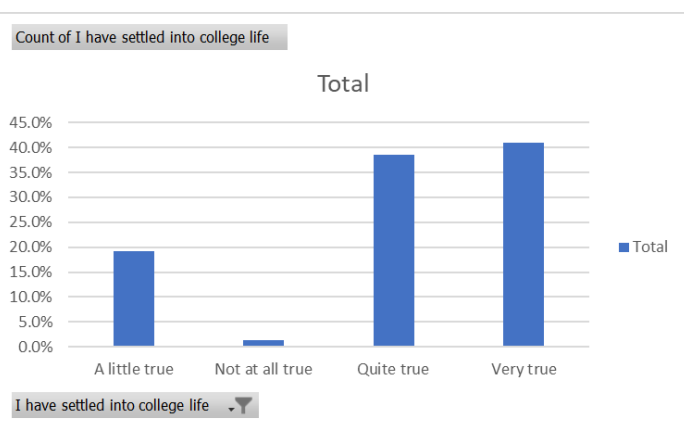
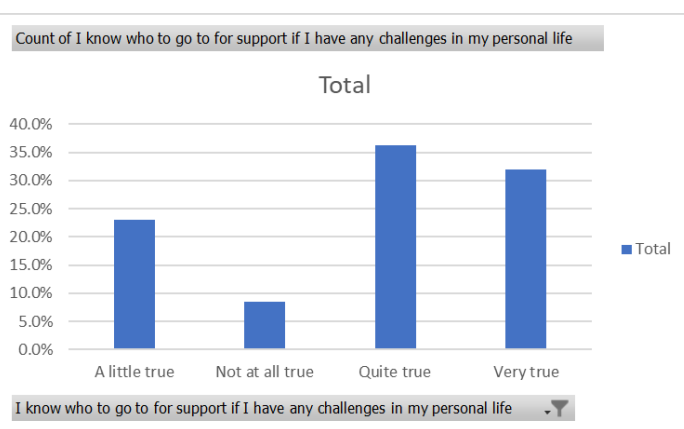
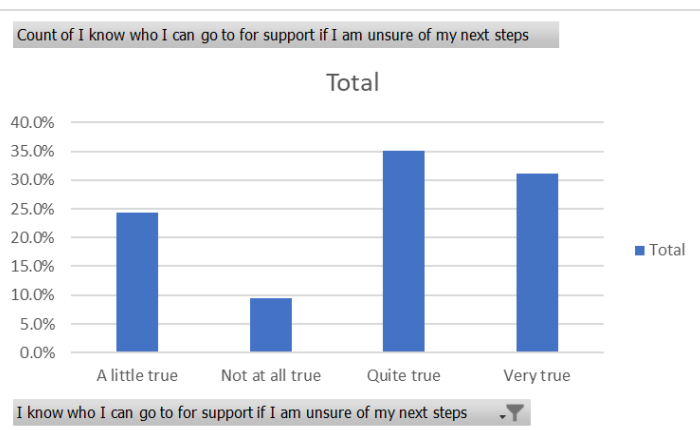
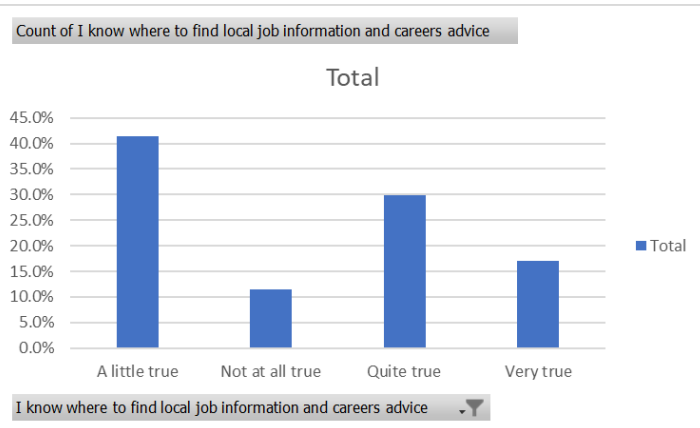
Further Education Funding Council. (1996). *Chief Inspector's Annual Report*. FEFC <https://www.nao.org.uk/pubsarchive/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2018/11/The-Further-Education-Funding-Council-for-England.pdf>

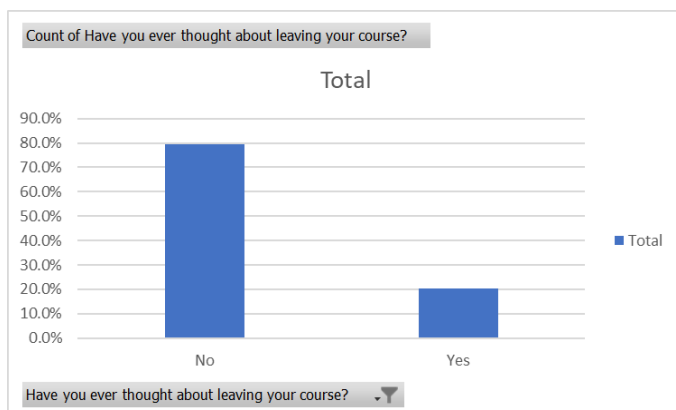
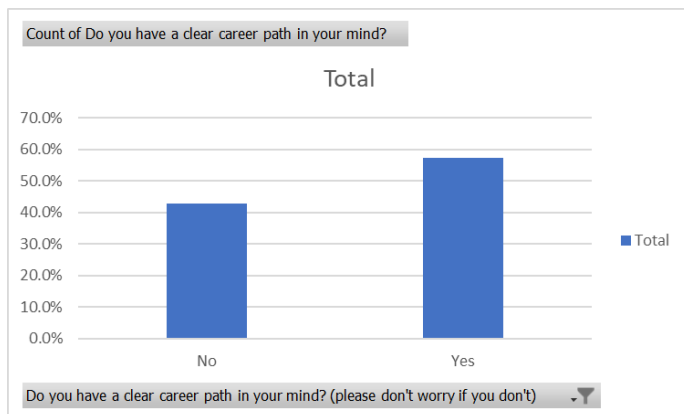
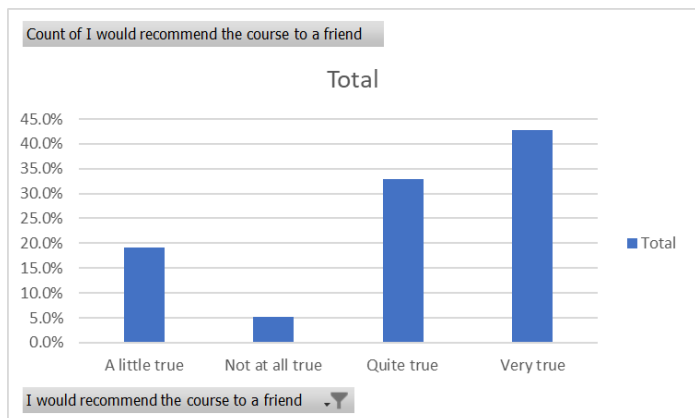
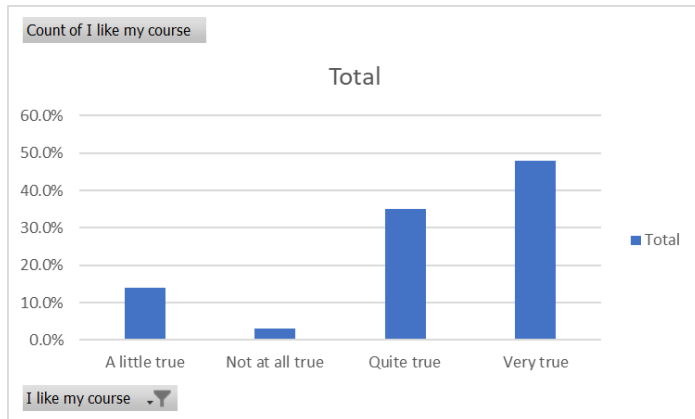
Smith, D. and McDonald, G. (2019). *Sun/BPC collaborative research project on level 2 study programmes* [online]. Bournemouth: Bournemouth and Poole College. Available from: <https://www.educationopportunities.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Neon-Level-2-presentation.pdf> [Accessed 3 January 2022].

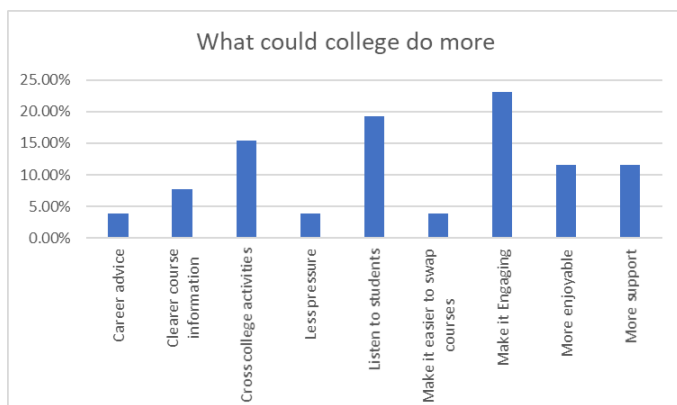
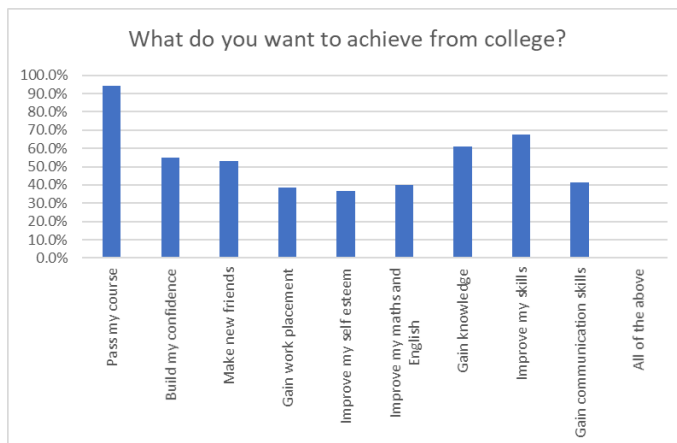
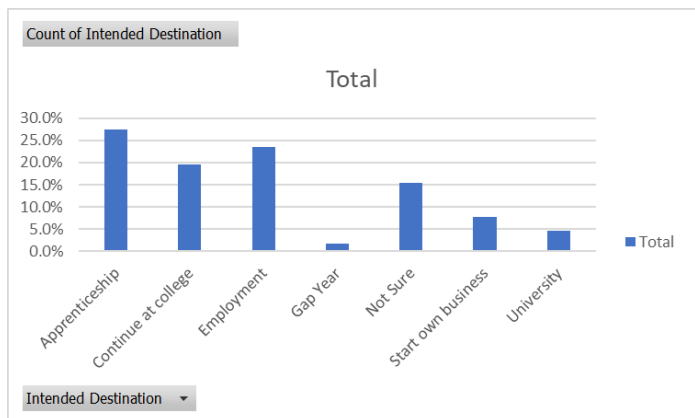
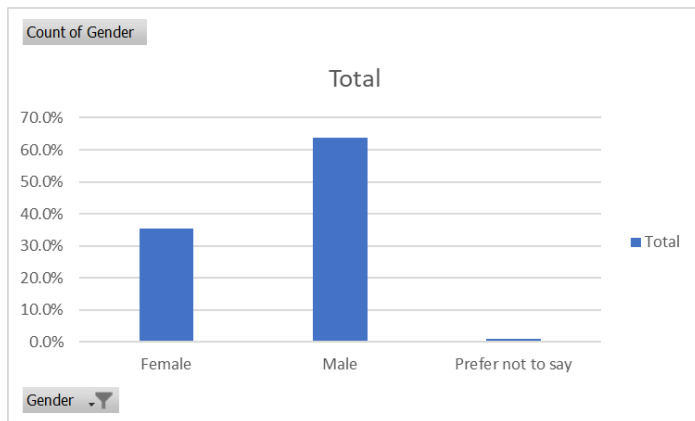
APPENDIX

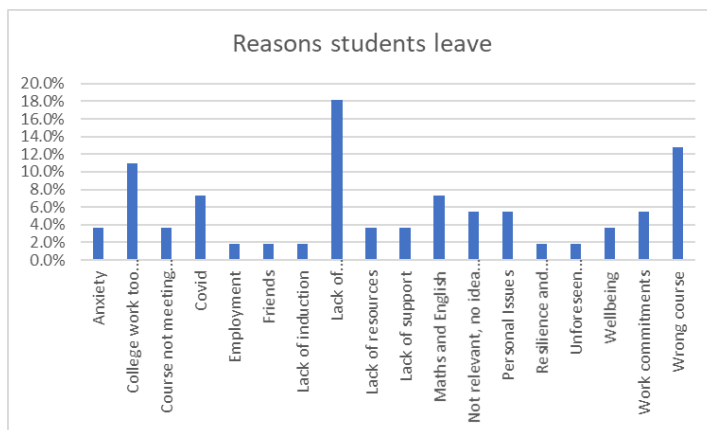
ANALYSIS OF RESULTS









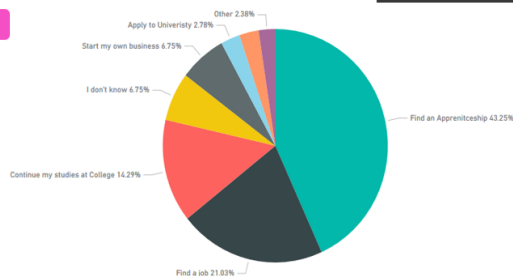


Next step after finishing this course

SUN SOUTHERN UNIVERSITIES NETWORK

HEADLINES:

- Most students studying at Level 2 **plan to enter the workplace** – either directly (21%) or through an Apprenticeship (43%)
- University remains in the plans for some (3%) with some acknowledging their next step is to remain at college and pursue their level 3 (14%)
- Almost 7% of students want to start their own business as their next step



Career aspirations

SUN SOUTHERN UNIVERSITIES NETWORK

Top 10 career aspirations

Don't Know	165	41%
Self Employed	46	11%
Apprenticeship	39	10%
Construction	25	6%
Mechanic	16	4%
Military	11	3%
Find a job	8	2%
Hairdressing	6	1%
Media	6	1%
electrician	5	1%

Headlines

- A large proportion (41%) of our Level 2 students do not know what they want to do yet
- Many of our students show the desire to own their own business in their lifetime (11%). How can we prepare them for this? How different are the skills required to that of Employability?
- And many are wanting to progress into either an Apprenticeship (10%) or a job (2%)
- Some students hold high aspirations which include Level 4 learning pathways. For example: Medicine (3), Midwife (3), Social Work (2), Vet (1), Teacher (3), Pharmacy (2), Accountant (1)

Insights

- When students say they want to be self employed their word count describing their future is higher and words used more passionate.
- Some students listed Level 3 as their aspiration, showing a marked difference between those who look short versus long term in their goals.