Coming from Behind: an investigation of learning issues in the process of widening participation in higher education.

**An abstract from the final report (March 2005)**

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# Introduction

This project was funded by the Education Learning and Teaching Network Centre (ESCalate). The objective of the project was to explore the characteristics of the learning of students who enter higher education without traditional learning backgrounds or on widening participation bases (ie without good ‘A’ Level backgrounds). Many programmes for ‘non traditional’ students incorporate study or higher education skills modules to support their learning. However, these modules tend to be based on assumptions about the kinds of learning deficits that the students may be experiencing, rather than being grounded in research on what is needed and how it is best provided. Specifically the aim of this project was to better identify what it is that we need to do with students or in higher education in order to facilitate rapid ability to function at higher education levels. It was seen as important in the research, to avoid, as much as possible, the stereotypical assumptions (eg that these students do not have adequate study skills).

# The progress of the research

The research was based on a study of the literature, work with non-traditional students and on work with staff, mainly who work with non-traditional students.

**The literature**: The review of the literature has revealed that there is a large coverage of material on widening participation, but little that focuses on the learning of the students. The literature has been divided into topics – epistemology and critical thinking, aspects of learning, student writing, study skills and self esteem and retention issues.

**The tools for researching with students and staff**. One of the assumptions on which this project is based is that researching the learning processes of these non-traditional students requires more than asking set of questions using their 'known' language about educational issues. The suggestion is that we may not know the right questions to ask about the learning process - and finding appropriate language and research tools is as important as attaining answers. This contention puts this project into the realm of 'multifaceted inquiry' rather than direct research. The process of developing the tools for eliciting information has been more than simply using obvious questionnaires about, for example, study skills.

The 39 students in the study were at level 1 (C) in higher education in a further education setting. They were given a series of questions for a written response that about their learning experiences. There were 16 questions, but they only had to respond to the first three and then could respond to whichever they chose in the rest of the time. This method was developed as a means of obtaining information without stimulating the form of response through the form of the question. The student questions are **in Appendix 1**

There have been over 200 staff who have been involved in the workshop for staff. The workshop had to be designed to fulfil two purposes. It was designed to provide data for the project and to be of value to the participants as a staff development session – so that there was an advantage for staff to attend. It was anticipated that participants would gain and share knowledge of the learning issues of non-traditional students, and that the workshop would give them time to reflect on new ways of supporting the learning of such students. An idea behind the design was that the staff should begin to look at the learning situation in different ways that often took the viewpoint of the student. The process of the workshop was designed to enable staff progressively to develop the theoretical 'language' in which to describe this. Case studies of students and ideas for support of those students emerged as the data that was required from the workshops.

A particular format of workshop was developed specifically for the project. The term 'story /or senario development workshop’ was used, and it seems that the format of the workshops will be of value in other situations than this work – and this has, indeed been the case. The workshop design is based on the collaborative development of case studies. The process relies on three elements:

* development of knowledge of learning among the participants and development among them of a language which they can use in description of the learner who is the subject of their case study – and, of course, in the wider context of their day to day work with students;
* their actual knowledge and experience of (live) learners;
* their reflective and imagination processes focussed on their work with non-traditional students.

## The process of running the workshop is supported by a detailed guide that contains the resources needed for the workshop. Throughout the workshop, participants work in small groups (eg of 6) in which to develop the case studies. As the guide to the workshop shows, at first, the groups are asked to imagine, describe and name a student who typifies a non-traditional student. The student that they choose should be one who has some typical difficulties in learning. The workshop then alternates between 'input' sessions on student learning, and the further development of the case studies until the penultimate session. The input sessions consist of exercises that aim to expand the participants' knowledge of learning, and provide them with new conceptions of the learning process and new language – and this further enables them to describe the subject of their case study. Examples of the input sessions are: a brainstorm on descriptors for 'good and poor learning / learners; an exercise on approaches to learning; a consideration of aspects of own experiences of learning in higher education, review of the kinds of difficulties that students report at early stages in higher education, an exercise on conceptions of knowledge - and so on. At the end of the workshop there is an important session in which the groups are asked in what ways they could better support the student in their case study.

## Outcomes of the project

The student questions were designed to elicit general and not specific information. The most obvious and important observation is that there is no one area of study difficulty on which all students agree. There are some areas of difficulty that were mentioned very frequently in the responses to questions. These were:

* Issues concerning time and its management
* Understanding what is required in higher education, standards etc
* Difficulties of writing in an academic setting
* Referencing (could be said to be a writing issue)
* The volume of work (that could also be a time management issue)
* Self confidence issues
* Social issues that could affect the quality of learning
* The significance of the first assessed piece of work
* Need for more IT support

The data from the staff workshops was in the form of case studies and it provided three forms of information. Firstly it provides illustrative and exemplar material concerning issues involved in the learning of students who come from non-traditional backgrounds. Secondly the case studies provides a second point of view on the learning of students. Using the two views has value in that it enables us to get beyond some of the limitations of the students’ conceptualisations of the learning process and it provides an extra dimension with which to view their learning. The educational process of the workshop enabled more sophisticated frames of reference to be used for the description of learning. Thirdly the staff workshops provided data on difficulties in learning that were seen by the staff.

There were 30 case studies of fictitious level 1 students **(Appendix 2).** A very common comment - on than a third of the fictitious students - was that the students had a strong drive towards success or they were highly motivated. The difficulties that were most commonly noted in the case studies were as follows (each noted in at least half of the case studies).

* Time management issues that affected the student’s learning
* Problems in writing
* Issues of personal confidence in the higher education environment
* ‘Not knowing where to start’, not understanding what is required in higher education

The similarity of this group of factors, coming from the staff, to those factors mentioned by the students (above) seems to be very close. Only around five (out of 200) of the staff involved in the research had anything to do with the actual students involved this research and yet both seem to be identifying similar issues in the learning of the students.

# Implications of the findings

We summarise the main list of issues about student learning that emanated from the student questions and the staff workshop:

* the accumulation of many minor difficulties as opposed to the effects of one or two major difficulties as an inhibition to student learning
* time management issues
* the significance of the role of writing is student development (including referencing)
* helping students to understand what they are being required to do – giving them a map of their programme and expected progress – examples etc
* the significance of the first assessed piece of work
* actively supporting progression in understanding of knowledge
* understanding potential difficulties of the young non-traditional students living at home.
* general issues of confidence and self esteem

**The accumulation of many minor difficulties**: First we return to an observation made at the beginning of this report – that while we have identified several difficulties that students experienced fairly consistently, there was a wide diversity in their nature. They extended from time management – about personal organisation around learning, to writing and epistemological issues and there was a wide range of other difficulties reported in ones and twos. There were hints that students might know that they were having problems – for example with writing - but could not always identify what the problem was. When we note that students are often also reporting a low level of self esteem, there are likely even to be difficulties in reaching a source of help if it is available and known to them. It is important that students are encouraged to seek help early on, not allowing a build-up of small difficulties into a situation that they could not handle. Other problems are likely to be accentuated when students indicate that they have problems with the management of their time. Difficulties with time are likely to compound many other pressures – see below.

It is interesting to consider whether most student support systems might currently be set up to deal mainly with a few deep needs for help (eg specific study problems) rather than support of the stressful accumulation of many relatively minor needs. There does tend often to be a positive move to put student support services in the same (physical) area.

Time management issues: The management of time was seen to be an issue for students in both the staff and student workshops and it is likely to be a factor that influences all others. The data here of course tells us nothing of time management issues for traditional students. How could students be helped with their management of time? A change in perception of the issue of time management initially might help. Many non-traditional students have to juggle with demands on their time and they – and their tutors - conceive of their struggle as an indication that they cannot cope – and therefore as a negative attribute. For example, one of the (real) students in discussion said ‘I feel that I cannot do anything properly’. This is a debilitating situation that drains confidence in the possibility of success. A change in perception could recognise their burden as a real one and recognise its potential influence on their learning as a legitimate interest of higher education (not just a problem in their environment outside higher education). Changing to a recognition that many students demonstrate a laudable ability to cope against large odds, and not a disability in time management, gives an opportunity for a different view and, perhaps different strategies for coping. This could be through the provision of a forum at which time issues can be acknowledged and discussed more openly in relation to learning. Sometimes staff need to become more realistic about just what time students have available for study. Sometimes further planning and prioritising with a supportive facilitator or peers can ease situations.

The next three topics tend to overlap. They are the role of writing, knowing what is expected in higher education and the significance of the first assessed piece of work.

**The role of writing in higher education** is explored elsewhere (Moon, 2005a, Moon, 2005b – in preparation). The ability to write and thereby to represent one’s learning is central to the study processes of most students. It seems that there is often an assumption that new students can write a sustained text as if writing text is a well-practiced everyday event for them - and they struggle. Writing has many roles in higher education and is an important means by which students learn. There is also a need to view support for writing as more than a ‘one off’ session of study skills about essay writing. Support needs to be broader and provided at different times in the programme. The skills required at level 1 are very different from those at level 3.

Writing is central to study for at least two major reasons – the most obvious is for its role in assessment of work but also it is the case that there are few activities of study that do not involve writing – and it is often in the written word that most thinking is enacted. From what the students said in this study and in the case studies in this project, it is clear that we cannot make any assumptions about the ability of students from non-traditional backgrounds to be able to write when they first start higher education. If students have not written an essay for twenty years, we should recognise that they are unlikely to know what a good essay looks like – in other words, they do not know what is expected.

The students and the staff commented frequently that **students did not know what was required of them in higher education**. In order to make this point more clearly we stand back from it. We imagine a senario that relates closely to the stories that students told in the discussion (above). A typical non-traditional student enters higher education. She has not recently written anything more than shopping lists, the occasional letter and a recently a couple of short reports in her workplace. When she arrives in class, she feels very enthusiastic but has no idea of what will be expected of her. School and the odd evening class are her only experiences of formal education. She waits to be guided and told what to do so in class so that then she can get a picture of what is expected. The tutors who work with her are keenly aware of the need to make students more autonomous and they avidly avoid ‘spoon-feeding.’ In the early classes, the student is told about the first assessed pieces of work. There will be a number of assessed pieces of work to be handed in more or less at the same time – in three to four months. When the student asks what she should do to study, she is told that this is higher education and she must be independent now.

The situation described in the paragraph above is common. If the student is lucky there might be some support with study, though it may not really answer the question ‘Where do I start / what do I need to do?’, asked so frequently in the case studies.

Examples of what is required in higher education can help. We need to re-evaluate the arguments against showing sample work to students to enable them to understand what is required. The reasoning from staff is often the fear that students will copy and thereby plagiarise the work. Why not allow some copying of style early on in a programme? Modelling behaviour is a normal pattern of learning everywhere else. Another concern voiced in the project work is that students come to think that there is only one way to respond to an essay question. It is easy to give further examples to ensure that students do not think that there is only one way to tackle an assignment. Perhaps another reason why examples are not given is that it requires staff to put their judgements – and even their own writing skills - into the open.

Another way of dealing with the sense of not understanding what is expected is to ensure that level 1 students have plenty of opportunity for contact with higher level students who are likely to have a better ‘sense of direction’ in their studies. In a part time programme, in which classes may occur in evenings, there may be little opportunity for informal contact and this would argue for the development of a peer mentoring system - which is elaborated below. Well supported peer and self assessment from early on in a programme also have the effect of enabling students better to understand what is required of them.

We said above that students were expected to be autonomous from very early in their programmes. We to need to think about the way in which to produce autonomous students. Autonomy is not generated by simply telling students that have to work out the system for themselves. What has come to be known as ‘spoonfeeding’ is required at first to equip students to be able to become autonomous. The issues about spoonfeeding arise when, at level 2 and later, students are still being given everything that they need for assessed work in handouts or on the web.

We have shown above that the use of assessment criteria and examples can ease the stress of **the first assessed piece of work.** The first assignment often provides the first reliable information for them as to what higher education requires of them, standards of work, styles of writing as well as providing an indicator of how they are progressing in relation to their colleagues. It is important to note that the first assessed piece of work is also the source, for most students, of huge anxiety. Much thought needs to be given to the first assignment in terms of its timing, nature and role (as a demonstration of standards and requirements). There is a further implication that the experience (and lack of it) and characteristics of the students might be ignored at the cost of student retention. In the project, it became clear that students need a very slow and gentle build up to the first assessed piece of work, with the provision of feedback on short pieces of writing or other representations of the learning that are relevant to the final piece. Such patterns are common and when planned carefully, can be much more helpful for students than isolated study skills sessions.

The need for **provision of active support for progression in the understanding of knowledge** is more speculative, but based on the author’s long contact with this issue in many contexts (Moon, 1999, 2004), in particular in the ‘Theory of Knowledge’ element of the International Baccalaureate programme for older school students. In the text above, we have indicated that particularly non-traditional students are ill-prepared to cope with the more sophisticated conceptions of knowledge that confront them in higher education. This occurs even at level 1. The following anecdote never fails to raise smiles of recognition from staff – perhaps from their own experience of that phase, and in recognition of the patterns of their students. A teacher gives students a number of different theoretical approaches to a phenomenon (perhaps presented as the approaches of several theorists). When she has finished presenting the material, the students look at the teacher, waiting for her to tell them which approach is the ‘right’ one but she says nothing. Students then reason that she is deliberately manipulating them into thinking by playing a guessing game. Because their view of knowledge is still quite absolutist (Baxter Magolda, 1992), they think that there is a right theory and they think that the teacher is an expert who knows the answer, but is holding it back.

We need much understanding of how students see knowledge (and some will be more sophisticated than others) and in the light of that, we need to understand the impact on them of the manner in which ideas are explored. In the view of the author, we need overtly to refer to the conceptions of knowledge, and to work on helping students towards the notion that knowledge is constructed, and that this is why it is legitimate for a number of theories to be held. We need to help them to recognise that there can be multiple viewpoints on an issue, and that all of those viewpoints can be appropriate. They need to understand that different disciplines process knowledge in different ways – particularly if they are studying more than one discipline. This is, in effect, the material of the International Baccalaureate Theory of Knowledge. University level students, and in particular those from non-traditional backgrounds need these ideas to be made explicit in order that they can progress and apply them in their academic work and not sit in a state of confusion for two or three years.

In the context of student conceptions of knowledge, we need also to think about the quality of teaching. There are plenty of references in the literature to the need for teachers to challenge students’ conceptions of knowledge in the manner in which they teach. We are making an assumption here that the teachers of students are functioning themselves with a more sophisticated view than the students and there is some evidence that this is not the case (eg Brownlee, 2001). Adding theory of knowledge as a taught topic to programmes would have the covert effect of subtle teacher education, thereby facilitating improved work across whole programmes.

The next point in the bulleted list above refers to an issue that became evident in two very different situations during the research. It concerns **the potential difficulties of the young non-traditional students living at home.** In these situations, the younger students themselves, their older mature student colleagues and staff who work with them said that these students often faced considerable conflict between their established home and social lives. At home they associate with peers who are not in higher education and they often come, themselves, from backgrounds where there is no higher education experience. These students often find it hard to stay in their homes and work, when the pressures to go out with and to continue to relate to their peers are strong. They may feel confused about the group with which to identify. This could be compounded in situations when their fellow students are largely mature students with homes and families – though of course, they also suffer from conflicts, particularly about juggling the demands on their time.

One of the ways in which these social difficulties (that affect learning) can be tacked is through provision of a carefully managed peer mentoring system, where the anticipated needs of students are considered in the pairing up.

**Issues of confidence and self esteem** in non-traditional students can also be supported though a mentoring scheme because students in higher levels remember what it feels like at entry stage to higher education. Staff may have only faded memories – and may have more traditional backgrounds. It is interesting to note that confidence and self esteem was an issue that was raised more by the students than by the staff in the staff workshops. We must be aware of how daunting academia must seem to be to those with no experience of it. Some of the measures to boost student confidence level (eg assertiveness training) can be better managed in the more student-centred environment of Student Union or Guild settings.

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## Appendix 1 Student questions

Questions about Learning

*I am doing some research on student learning and the difficulties that students may have in starting in higher education.*

*When I talk about learning, here, unless it is obvious, I am talking about all aspects of higher education (HE) work – reading, writing, work with IT, study skills, doing assessment tasks etc. I am interested in learning in general terms – not with the curriculum content as such.*

*I am asking you to respond to the first two questions and then after that to respond to whichever questions you choose – but do write down the number of the question to which you are responding. You will find that some questions ask you about your own experiences. Some ask you about more general issues of study and learning in your experience of HE and some ask you to give advice to tutors or students about learning. You can write a lot about one question or respond to lots of questions with fewer words. You can pick questions from all over the list.*

*At some stage I may ask you to stop writing and to discuss what you have written with a group of your colleagues. After that I will then ask you to write some more. The discussion may remind you of some other aspects of learning about which you could write.*

*The response sheets are anonymous. Thank you very much for your help. I hope that the process will have been of interest to you in asking you to reflect a bit on your learning - Jenny Moon, University of Exeter – J.Moon@Exeter.ac.uk.*

It would be helpful if first you these two questions:

1. What were the three most difficult things about learning when you first came into HE?

2. What would you say were the reasons for you undertaking an HE course?

….and now choose whichever questions you like to respond to

1. If you were starting the course again, and could have any help with learning or study skills that you wished, what, in retrospect, might have been useful – and when?

4. Have there been any words or academic terms that you have encountered in your learning and assessment processes about which you were or are unsure? Would you list them and say a bit about why you found them difficult (eg I remember not understanding the idea of ‘ theory’).

5. When you look back on being set your first assessed piece of work, what aspects of it generated concern.

6. I would like you to subject your learning to a ‘SWOT’ analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) – and respond to:

What are the strengths of your learning?

What are the weaknesses?

What opportunities could make your learning better?

What factors could you say have made it more difficult to learn this year?

7. In terms of your writing skills, did you feel that you had the right skills when you came into HE – and if not, what were the aspects you lacked?

8. How did you manage with taking notes when you were first here? Do you write notes any differently now?

9. What did you think HE learning would be like? In what ways has learning been easier or more difficult than you expected – and how?

10. What are the differences, would you say, between those of your peers who seemed to find learning easy and those for whom it is more difficult?

11. If you were asked to give guidance to teaching staff of level C students about how to help their students to get started on the learning in their courses, what would you say?

12. What holds students back in terms of their learning in the early part of their HE programmes?

13. If you had been offered a study skills course before you came to HE, in what area(s) would you like to have had the most help?

14. It is often said that lack of confidence as a student can be a problem for new students in HE. What could be done to help students to become more confident?

15. It has been said that you need to ‘know the code’ or ‘understand the rules of the game’ in order to survive in higher education. Do you agree. Could you expand on your response.

16. Are there academic conventions that you feel you should have been helped to understand.

Have you any other comments about learning experiences in higher education? This is an opportunity to expand about any aspect of HE learning that you wish.

Thank you again for your help!

## Appendix 2 A sample of the case studies that resulted from staff workshops

These case studies are samples of thirty case studies that have been developed from eight workshops, with over 200 participants

# Stephanie

Aged 21 is doing a FdSc in Health and Fitness. She is a single mother with a 3 year old child on benefits and wants to get off benefits and gain a career. She wants to continue her education at FE college. She has 4 ‘C’s at GCSE and a vocational qualification as a YMCA Fitness Instructor (and does part time work there). She feels nervous and anxious about the financial consequences of working.

She is keen and enthusiastic. She is trying to succeed

Has difficulties with academic skills – numeracy, IT skills and research skills.

She has trouble meeting deadlines.

Has difficulty finding space and time to work at home

She is absent at times, due to hassles with the Benefits agency and with a crisis at home.

She tends to be strategic / surface in her approach to learning – as she has a lot to cope with and is already managing much.

The issues about learning are made more complex because there are other factors that arise – for example, lack of time for academic work.

What Stephanie needs is confidence and a belief in what she has to offer.

# Minaxi Patel

Minaxi is female and 24. She is doing a Fd in Business and Law. She wants to become qualified to work as a business lawyer. She has GCSE’s. She was married according to cultural expectations, at 17 and helped in a corner shop for 7 years. She has three children under 6, who are all at playgroup or school. Her husband died recently and her future responsibilities will include support of her husband’s parents.

She is conscientious, compliant and eager to learn.

There are conflicts between her commitment to the course and the needs of the children. She sometimes has child care problems and has to rush home.

She is torn between her will to succeed and the pressures from her family.

She feels insecure and guilty and worries about deadlines.

She has a concern about not meeting her own high standards.

She does not understand the ‘demands’ of academic writing. She says ‘Where do I start?’.

About her work, the tutor says ‘There are some good points, but still a lot of progress to be made’.

Her response is still ‘Where do I start?’.

She is a committed learner. She wants to succeed, but has too many demands on her time.

She did not understand the time required and this causes a negative reaction from her family that further impinges on her.

## Britney Beckham

Britney is 25. She is doing a FdA in sport development in a part time programme. She is a single mother with three children, a part time swimming teacher, and gym instructor. She left school at 15 with not qualifications.

Britney’s orientation to study is vocational and personal. She has underdeveloped learning skills and a sense of an external locus of control. She has unclear short term goals- but has longer terms goals. She has a supportive family and employer. She is highly motivated – is open-minded and can take on new ideas.

In terms of her approach to learning, she is strategic and surface but will develop a deeper approach during the course.

She identifies the three most difficult things at the start of the programme as (1) not knowing what to expect; the difficulty of fitting in. (It was a daunting social experience) and her lack of study skills. In terms of her expectations about higher education (9), she thought it would be full of very young people; she thought it would be like school and that she would be left on her own.

In terms of support, she needs child care, a laptop computer, work-based mentoring and study skill support that is embedded in the programme on an ongoing basis.

Frank

Frank is 48, and is doing a Geography and Environmental Management programme. He was made redundant two years ago from work in quality control in manufacturing engineering. His had been 36 years with the same company and started on the shop floor. He wants to diversify his life. He is divorced. He did an Access course at Yeovil College in Sciences.

Frank is at university in order to get a better job – but he is stimulated by the academic environment. He was inspired by his daughter’s experience at UCE (an English degree). He has a positive attitude but has problems in confidence, in assembling ideas and in articulating ideas.

Frank has a ‘pedentary’ approach to learning. His skills with computers and with written literacy do not easily translate into the academic context. He does not realise the knowledge that he actually has. He has problems in executing coursework. Tends towards a scatterlogical approach, but is also thorough. He has problems with critical engagement with material. He can take a deep approach to his learning, can be strategic – but sometimes is cynical.

Franks maturity has given him a ‘crystallised view of the world’, and as a result of his divorce, recognises the role of preconceptions.

Jose da Silva

Jose is 28 and on a Foundation degree in Tourism Management. He was originally from S. America and English is his second language. He has a ‘challenging’ marriage and works on night duty in a care home (severely handicapped children). He wants to progress to a degree with the top-up year. He is motivated ‘on his own terms’, possibly having problems adapting to UK academic cultures / structures. He wants ultimately to return to S. America and to start his own business.

In terms of his orientation in higher education, his orientation is vocational though he may also be keen to use the degree to delay his return home. He has an instrumental approach to learning, and there are some conflicts in his aims. He finds the programme harder than he expected. He is not very organised, thinking that study would be easy. He is trying to do too much (in his life). He does not understand ‘the game’, and the need to rethink the areas of his life and cultural issues. He has problems with groupwork and deadlines. He is resistant to adapting and also lacks knowledge of what, in UK academic conventions, to adapt to. He has ability, but barriers to learning (such as culture, home life and his goals) that create tensions and conflict.

In terms of his approaches to learning, Jose does sometimes show evidence of taking a deep approach, but mostly is strategic, doing ‘just enough’. When he was given a written task, he commented ‘I am not sure what I am supposed to read or how I should write it, but – no problem, I can ask my friends. I can fit this in when I have got the time’. He is not appreciating the time and work required or the implications of sequential processes of learning. He edges near to plagiarism. The work that he does is incomplete, descriptive and an insufficient application of the learning that he should have done.

The stage of conception of knowledge (Baxter Magolda) that is evidenced is variable.

In terms of support, he needs study skills in critical thinking, and personal management (time management, and a gain in understanding of the consequences of his actions). Some of this could come out of PDP initiatives. He needs help from a personal tutor / advisor and compulsory non-assessed diagnostics should be considered.

## Mr Cool

Mr Cool is 26 and on a Sport Science programme. It is a full time honours degree with a placement for work-based learning. Mr Cool comes from a privileged background but ‘underperformed’ at school thought he excelled at sport. In terms of his qualifications, he has PE ‘A’ level (grade C) and General Studies (grade E). He has worked in sport shops. He has been getting bored and feels that he wants to fulfil his potential. He feels that doing the degree is the ‘right’ thing to do. He is a bit apprehensive and he has limited academic skills.

He has personal and vocational orientations to study. He has problems with academic self-esteem, feels lacking in confidence and out of practice with study. He feels that he has poor understanding of the ‘academic game’. He has specific problems with written work, does not see the value of reflecting on performance. He does not understand the role of uncertainty in learning.

When he has a written task, Mr Cool says ‘I am bored and scared of failing’. He is apprehensive about the task, wants success. He is good at gathering information but cannot put the ideas together on paper. He is not used to referencing , not understanding the concept behind using other peoples’ ideas. His tutor comments that ‘He’s good in class and has great ideas but can’t string two words together on paper’.

Mr Cool’s conception of the nature of knowledge is still that knowledge is absolute and certain. To succeed, he feels that he needs to be good at absorbing and remembering.

In terms of support for his learning, it would be useful to apply the concept of multiple intelligences, to identify his strengths and validate his experiences. It is important to identify his weaknesses and to accept them.