

Enabling Progression: A partnership approach at the FE/HE interface

There have clearly been benefits in having a distinct and relatively autonomous FE college sector which has been able to reach out and widen participation in HE...However, the disadvantage is a less than seamless articulation between this system and the HEIs, which creates barriers for students wishing to progress from one system to another. (Gallacher J, 2003)

In Scotland almost all HNQs are offered in Further Education Colleges. The colleges have seen major increases in the number of learners accessing higher level study and this had led to Scotland reaching the magical 50% participation figure before other parts of Britain.

Almost two thirds of HE students in colleges are enrolled on HNC or HND courses and of these 42% are on full time HN programmes. The figures further reveal that although the majority of HE full time student attend an HEI (79%) the majority of part time HE students (61%) attend an FEC. However the majority of those attending an HE programme at an HEI are still from those social backgrounds who have traditionally accessed university study. The FECs therefore are playing an important role in widening access to higher education.

The FECs success in attracting a much higher percentage of students from disadvantage areas than is to be found in the university sector is another important part of their distinctive contribution. (Gallacher, J 2003)

In trying to address the inequality in HE level study the Scottish Executive is, among a number of widening access policies, promoting articulation between FECs and HEIs. Irrespective of Ian Gray's (former Minister of Enterprise and LifeLong Learning in the last Scottish Executive) performance at the recent elections to the Scottish Executive articulation is here to stay. However there is no template for articulation across the sector(s) and no common understanding of what articulation means. The Scottish Advisory Committee on Credit and Access (SACCA) are currently working on a set of guidelines for the FE/HE interface that are designed to support this area of work. How the different sectors will respond to these guidelines, and how different institutions within the sectors will respond, is a matter for conjecture although initial reaction to the first drafts of the guidelines has been positive.

For the University of Stirling the definition of articulation is fairly clear. The University will accept students who have successfully completed a specific HNC onto AY2 of a matched degree programme and into AY3 from an HND. This is not a blanket acceptance of HND students into AY3 or HNC students into AY2 but rather it is a controlled development of articulation which seeks to enable, encourage and support HN students seeking to make this move.

Currently the University has articulation agreements, in limited subject areas, with eight colleges. This isn't because the University seeks to restrict the growth of articulation agreements, but rather that the University is seeking to ensure that these agreements are sustainable, that they represent a positive experience for all involved, especially the students, and HN students are encouraged to see this progression to degree level study at Stirling as a viable and achievable option.

This approach has meant that we have not been hurried by issues of funding or student numbers but rather that we have taken time to ensure, as much as possible, that the agreements signed have focused as much on the needs of the students as they have on the requirements of the University.

It is a central tenet of the development of articulation at Stirling that the process is partnership led, using an approach that embodies a real input from our partner colleges, one that sees all partners striving to make these agreements happen. With funding from SHEFC's Strand Four Widening Access monies, Stirling, through its New Subjects New Students Project, focused on the development and completion of a set number of articulation agreements. However, it soon became clear that in order for articulation to have a more significant impact, and for it to develop to suit the needs of prospective students coming through this route, the University had to take a far more holistic view.

Firstly, therefore, partner colleges were consulted, both formally and informally, to ascertain their views on a lasting articulation procedure. It became clear that the initial drive for curriculum matching distracted from other key components of the process, most notably pre-entry student support. The consultation led to the production of an integrated articulation template, upon which all future articulation agreements would be based.

The template not only focuses on curriculum matching, it also provides a standard application and entry procedure. Most importantly, though, the template lays out details of a pre-entry support programme aimed at all articulating students. This pre-entry student support programme is provided by the University's lead department on widening access, the Division of Academic Innovation and Continuing Education (DAICE). The template was circulated to a number of key departments in the University, and to partner colleges, to ensure that the finished document reflected the needs of all those involved in the process.

The aim of this pre-entry programme is to provide the HNQ student with information, support and experience of degree level study at the university and, in particular, access to subject specialists at the university who will provide more focused information. The HNQ student should be informed at the beginning of their programme of the entry criteria for their particular subject area. This is followed by students being asked early in their programme (at the beginning of the programme for HNC students and at the beginning of AY2 for HND students) of their intention to progress onto degree level study at the university at the end of their HNQ. The information is made available to the Student Recruitment and Admissions Service and then passed on to the appropriate academic department. This process encourages departments to set up a communication process with potential students. This

communication may result in a member of the academic departments visiting the particular college(s) to talk to the students directly, or inviting the students to a particular event, or events, that the departments are running. Partner colleges are also encouraged to invite academic departments to attend college based events. The University encourages staff to liaise regularly with college colleagues. Students who do not utilise this articulation process to progress onto a degree programme are not barred from applying to the university for entry to a degree programme, but they may miss out on part, or all, of the pre-entry support on offer.

Before Christmas in the year prior to articulation students spend one afternoon at the University and are given general information about studying at Stirling, including information from the students association and the various learning and student support services. Crucial to this is the input from a student who has already made the move from an HNQ to AY2 or AY3 of a degree programme. In the February immediately before the deadline for applications students are invited onto the campus for a study skills day. Here the students attend a lecture and seminar on study skills and are given access to staff from the various academic departments involved in articulation. The students are specifically invited on a day of the week when large numbers of undergraduates are on campus, and are directed rather than led to the lecture theatre and seminar rooms. The experience provides students with the opportunity to sample HE life at its most frenetic. The students then submit their applications by the March deadline.

The articulation agreements set out agreed entry criteria for HNQ students. However, those successful HNQ students who fail to meet these criteria are guaranteed an interview by the department. The result of this interview may be that the applicant is offered entry to their desired year, or offered entry to the year below. The interviews take place and the results are passed to the University's Student Recruitment and Admissions Service and the applicant by the end of July. This allows unsuccessful applicants to apply for entry to other HEIs through the UCAS clearing system.

Finally, the successful applicants attend a three day pre-entry study support programme in the week prior to the semester. During the three days, applicants will be enrolled, given a library tour, their electronic password and meet academic staff from the appropriate departments. This programme is designed in concert with the University of Stirling Students Association (SUSA) so that these new students would be free to attend the start of the semester Fresher's Fair with all the other new entrants. Attendance at this three day programme is compulsory on two accounts. It is important that when teaching starts the following week the students have already built relationships with other articulating students providing peer support. But more so, attendance at this programme ensures that all enrolment and administrative arrangements are concluded so that when the teaching programme begins in the following week new students are free to concentrate on their studies.

This process therefore standardises articulation agreements across the university and ensures that potential applicants receive the same level of support prior to their application for, and entry to, a degree programme.

Although the articulation programme itself enables HN students to progress onto a degree programme, there is still the question of whether the programme makes a real

contribution to widening access. If our aim is to simply lay down a procedure to enable HN students to articulate from an HN programme onto a degree programme then the current programme will suffice. However, if our aim is to encourage, support and enable those students who are from socially disadvantaged groups to progress from an HNQ to degree level study at Stirling then our current programme is simply the first step in achieving this goal.

There is no doubt that the FE sector is far more successful in relation to widening access than HEIs.

Participation rates in FE colleges for those from the most disadvantaged areas are about twice as high as those found in HEIs. (Gallacher, J. 2003)

Although there has been limited research undertaken in this area, as a former Senior Lecturer in Adult education at an FE college managing the college's community based provision, I found that simply setting up systems to enable learners to progress from a community based provision to a campus based provision was limited in achieving this goal. Socially disadvantaged learners required a system that enabled them to access a college provision without committing themselves to longer term programme until they were ready to do so. Thus came the development of small college based programmes, staffed by the same tutors that taught in the community provision, which focused not only on the learning at hand, but had at their centre the aim of enabling these learners to experience college, and through this experience and support from learning and support staff, progress onto a college based programme.

The FE sector, though, is far better equipped to offer this type of provision than HEIs. The FE sector obviously offers both FE and HE level study enabling students to move through these discrete levels with recognised exit points available at the end of each programme. These exit points may be onto further study or into employment, but the student is aided in this decision by a guidance and information system.

As far as progression with their studies are concerned most students find that the staff who teach on FE programmes at colleges will be the same people who teach on the HE level courses. This adds a further dimension to the support system available to students as they seek to continue with their study.

Progression to degree level study at an HEI represents a move into a new learning environment where methods of delivery and assessment may be different. Previously for these students progression with their learning took place in a familiar learning environment and was relatively seamless. The move from FE to HE is culturally and educationally immense.

The challenge, therefore, for the University of Stirling is to devise a system of pre-entry support that enables HN student to experience studying at the University while still remaining, in the main within a familiar FE learning environment. Furthermore, this system must enable these students to gain this experience without detriment to the current HNQ programme while also using this experience to aid transition from FE based study to study at an HEI.

To achieve this the University, through DAICE, is embarking on a pilot programme with the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). This pilot will see the SQA accredit an undergraduate unit, in the case of this pilot a European politics unit, as part of the HND Social Science. The HND student will undertake this undergraduate unit on the university campus and this unit will replace an appropriate number of SQA HN units (probably two) in order to ensure that their HND programme does not exceed thirty SQA units.

Students will attend lectures and seminars on the university campus with their results for this unit being transmitted to the college. The successful completion of this unit will enable the student to access AY3 of the Politics degree honours programme. However, the student is not compelled to progress onto the degree programme and can simply complete the unit and graduate with their HND award should they wish to.

This pilot programme then, is a much about enabling students to experience studying at the university, as it is bridging curricular gaps. It is hoped that be enabling students to study on campus without committing themselves to a degree programme this will encourage more HN students to take up the option of articulated study.

Central to the success of this whole process remains partnership working. Our partnership working in articulation, not only includes our FE partners and the internal academic departments, but University support services including the Student Recruitment and Admissions service and, as important, student representatives. The inclusion of the Stirling University Students' Association (SUSA) in the development of articulation has been vital to its success. SUSA (and its Mature Students Body SUMSA) have played a major role in the development of student support. As with our other internal partners, SUSA attend our FE days in the university to provide information and support to those HN students who are looking to progress to degree level study at Stirling. They play an extremely important role in the development of articulation at the University, in that they can uniquely cast an evaluative eye over the whole process from the students' point of view. As articulation focuses on ensuring that the student has a positive experience at the University, SUSA's role has been crucial when the pre-entry support programme.

This work with partners has led to some other developments. Discussions on pre-entry support to HN students enabled the university to successfully apply for funding from JISC for a pre-entry learning support project in partnership with four local FE colleges. Further discussions on widening access through articulation with SUSA have enabled the University to focus on the support services available to students. The University does not offer childcare facilities on campus and DAICE and SUSA are now working with FE and local authority colleagues in the development of an off campus childcare facility for community based learners and FEC and HEI students.

Articulation should not be simply gestural, universities being adhering to government policy on widening access in pursuit of political correctness or the Funding Councils' shilling. Nor should it be a mechanism to attract students into hard to recruit subject areas. Rather, articulation should enable universities to alter the way in which, and the social groups which they recruits students to degree courses. It should contribute to the enfranchising of those currently left on the fringes of higher education. Not all students will choose to move from FE base higher education to HE based higher

education. And nor should they feel they have to. However, the role of articulation is to break down the barriers within higher education between FE and HE. Practically, to make the move from HNC to AY2 and HND to AY3 degree level study a viable and achievable alternative for those HN students who wish it.

References:

Gallacher, J (2003), Higher Education in Further Education colleges: The Scottish Experience. The Council for Industry and Higher Education