

The Adult Compact in Lancashire, 2000-2002: a structural analysis of success and failure

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1. What was the Lancashire Adult Compact and what did it do?

The Lancashire Adult Compact project was funded for the three calendar years 2000 to 2002 by the Widening Participation special funding initiative. In 2000 and 2001 it was funded by the joint Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE)/Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) Fund, and in 2002 by the joint HEFCE/Learning and Skills Council (LSC) Fund (HEFCE 99/33, HEFCE 00/35 and FEFC 99/29). Essentially about £70,000 per annum was made available. So-called transitional funding was added for the first quarter of 2003. The Adult Compact was part of the much larger Lancashire Compact - a partnership of the Lancashire higher education institutions (HEIs) (University of Central Lancashire, Edge Hill College, Ormskirk, St. Martin's College, Lancaster and Lancaster University). The Lancashire Compact developed a programme of widening participation activities for schools and colleges. The Adult Compact was concerned with progression to, and participation in, higher education by adults and was managed and directed from the Lancaster University Department of Continuing Education.

Overall the Adult Compact was funded to work towards two aims:

- to provide guidance, support and advocacy for adults seeking to enter higher education
- to work with the four partner higher education institutions to reduce the barriers between adults and entry to, and success in, higher education.

It was not a research project, nor was it funded to develop theory. It was meant to identify specific developmental activities to be undertaken, and to try to tackle these using a collective approach. We believed that by having clear operational goals each year, by careful planning and by working efficiently, something could be achieved.

The title, 'Lancashire Adult Compact', was given to the project after its start by the parent Lancashire Compact. It was felt to be tidier for the two projects to bear a similar title and it transpired that intrinsically the title fitted well. The Project's compact clearly had to be with the adults of Lancashire, offering to help them to secure a better deal from the County's universities and colleges of higher education; the Project's compact with the Lancashire universities and colleges had to be to work even-handedly with them and not to pursue the interests of any particular institution, notably Lancaster University which was housing the Project.

The Adult Compact was funded on a one-year renewable basis, and each year a proposal for further funding had to be written about mid-way through the year. However, there was always a general notion of a three-year plan of work which would fall into three phases and relate to the Project's two general aims described above. One could characterise the three phases of the Project's lifespan as being those of Exploration, Audit, and Development - the three coinciding with the funded three years of the Adult Compact.

Figure 1 attempts to summarise the range of activities undertaken by the Adult Compact over the three years, without going into detail.

Figure 1 here

2. What did the Lancashire Adult Compact achieve?

The general view, from partner institutions, external commentators and feedback from dissemination events, is that the Lancashire Adult Compact was a success. The indicators of success, which these sources appear to have taken into account, include: achievement of stated aims and yearly objectives; efficiency of project and financial management;

promotion and support of cross-institutional activities and networks of colleagues ; volume of valued Project products. Achievements can be summarised under the following headings.

Knowledge

The Adult Compact has made some significant additions to comparative knowledge about the ways that the Lancashire HEIs relate to adults as potential and actual students, and the levels of service which they make available to them. Through the various audits (see Figure 1) the Adult Compact has identified differences between the HEIs, some of which reflect their different missions and natures. But others appear to reflect different organisational and operational approaches and, perhaps, different levels of concern and attention to the needs of adult students.

Changes

The Adult Compact could claim to have affected practice in the Lancashire HEIs during the three years. For example, the report on the 'mystery shopper' exercise in 2001, which investigated the way in which the four HEIs dealt with postal enquiries from invented stereotypical adult students, actually shocked some senior managers and, in at least one institution we understand, led to a new appointment. The Mapping Exercise from 2000 identified some areas of vocational higher education to which it was not obvious how an adult living in certain areas of the County would be able to make progression. Some of the partner HEIs, having become aware of this, set about rectifying matters by consulting with local further education colleges to provide progression pathways.

Products

There are, indeed, a significant number of tangible products from the Adult Compact. For example, over twenty Adult Compact reports (mostly with recommendations for action and change) on different aspects of the Project's activity can be counted. A key issue, in the after-life of the Adult Compact as well as during it, has been how useful could these reports be made to the benefit of Lancashire adults and the further and higher education institutions, and how effectively could they be disseminated and implemented.

Partnership

This partnership of the four universities and colleges worked, and that was an important achievement. Although the project was run from Lancaster University, it was careful to involve all partners in decisions. It was the Project Management Group, which included all partners and the Open College of the North West (OCNW), which made key decisions.

Embedding

It is one of the standard criticisms, rightly, of limited-term development projects funded by non-mainstream monies that their activities, no matter how successful, are not continued by the host institutions after the money has run out. The Project began to attempt the process of embedding early. In Year 2 (2001), a procedure was devised which was logical and carried out as planned. Four audits of institutional practices as they affected adults (see Figure 1) were completed; in October 2001 the Project held a workshop, well-attended by middle managers from the four Lancashire higher education institutions, to refine recommendations and action points from the audits; in December 2001 a meeting of senior managers from the four higher education partners was held, again well-attended, in which embedding of the action points was one of the main agenda items. The latter was a well-intentioned meeting, but difficult to facilitate to a point at which an agreed cross-institutional mechanism for embedding Project outcomes was agreed. A mechanism was eventually identified, but it did not work successfully in the year 2002.

3. But has the Lancashire Adult Compact had an impact?

As they write this in Spring 2003, the authors are aware that they have accomplished a well-received development project, but want to know if it has made a difference. Or could it still make a difference if certain action was now to be undertaken?

Student numbers and organisational politics

The Adult Compact cannot claim that it will have increased the number of adult students wanting to progress, or succeeding in progressing, into higher education in Lancashire. Figure 2 shows a number of interesting factors about adult progression into the four higher education institutions of Lancashire.

Figure 2 here

It can be seen from Figure 2 that in the period 1997/98 to 2000/01 there were significant differences between the four higher education partners over their admission of adults to full-time first degree courses. In 1997/98, 38% of the intake of the University of Central Lancashire was adult; the equivalent figure for Lancaster University was 13%. During this period the proportionate intake of adult students to the Lancashire HEIs fell from 28% to 23%; most of the decline being in the two universities. Overall the raw numbers of adults entering full-time degree courses in the four Lancashire HEIs in the four years fell by 457.

Figure 3 here

Figure 3 uses a different database and refers to the period 2000/01 to 20002/03 - the period of the Adult Compact project. It shows an overall growth in the period of adult accepts to degree courses in the four HEIs of 25%. There are annual fluctuations in the intakes and no overall trend. Lancaster University was markedly less likely to admit adult students than the other Lancashire HEIs.

Even if there had been a marked and uniform increase in adult student progression to the full-time undergraduate courses of the four Lancashire HEIs, it would have been facile to attribute it to the efforts of the Adult Compact. The argument of this paper is that there are macro policy, social and economic influences affecting the situation. Nor, although adults make up about 25% of the intake of three of the four HEIs in the partnership, is there strong evidence that the Adult Compact changed the visibility, politically or institutionally, of adults in the four Lancashire universities and colleges.

Currently, adults appear not to be pivotal to the agendas of the four higher education institutions; nor are they at the centre of their widening participation agenda, which are focussed on outreach to schools and raising aspirations to progress to higher education among young people normally aged 16 years or younger.

Embedding of Project Outcomes

The Adult Compact was not actually established to increase the numbers or proportion of adult students in the Lancashire higher education institutions. Nor was it funded to change the balance of policy issues on the campuses. It was funded to identify areas of project work which would assist adult progression in Lancashire; to carry them out to secure worthwhile outcomes; to report on them; and to embed good practice in cross-institutional activity and/or within partners.

Earlier in this paper we admitted that on the question of embedding and mainstreaming of Adult Compact outcomes the work remains unfinished. The reasons have something to do with the different size of the institutions, their institutional purposes and ways of functioning. The Adult Compact's hypothesis was always that some issues and concerns about adults' progression into higher education in Lancashire could best be addressed in the long term by the four institutions working together and involving the further education colleges. Some of these issues were explored in Adult Compact audits. At the time of writing, the Adult Compact has yet to succeed in initiating ongoing co-operative work between the partners and others on these issues. The causes appear to have less to do with rivalry or institutional self-interest (of which there was formerly some history in Lancashire), than the sheer burdens on colleagues of everyday business, the unfamiliarity of collective endeavour (and the limited rewards for engaging in it - compare Fryer (ed), 1997, 75-76).

The Nature of Partnership

We have argued above that the Lancashire Adult Compact was a successful partnership in which decisions and tasks were shared. Colleagues from the partner institutions, including OCNW and some of the further education colleges, came to know each other reasonably well and to work together successfully. This was one of the rewarding aspects of the Project. However, it is important to recognise that there are many different kinds of partnership, and that they can be differentiated on a range of dimensions. We can try to place the Adult Compact on the dimension of durability, on whether its relationships with partner higher education institutions were 'organic' or 'surface'. We have to conclude that the Compact was not an 'organic' partnership which grew naturally out of the converging missions of the partner institutions, but was a 'surface' partnership generated essentially by external requirements to work together to receive HEFCE widening

participation funding. The Adult Compact partnership worked well and productively, but the partnership was held together by the value and achievability of the immediate common task and the trust established between individuals (for a detailed discussion of models of partnership and collaboration see Percy *et al.*, 1983,161 -176)

But that was in the nature of the situation. Universities and higher education colleges are in the marketplace, to a greater or lesser extent competing for students, money, prestige, staff and national and international recognition. Targets, audits, quality assessment and declining units of resource provide the immediate constraints upon freedom of action. It is now almost not possible for universities and higher education colleges organisationally to follow 'pure' policies of altruism or co-operation. Adult progression to higher education was not a likely arena for an 'organic' partnership between the four Lancashire higher education institutions.

Good practice

There is no doubt that much was done in the Adult Compact which will have affected the practice of Lancashire higher education institutions towards adults - often small things, such as adjustments to procedures, clarifying of requirements, improved communication, better relationships with the further education colleges, and greater integration with OCNW. Often the Project's audits have shown that one of the higher education partners is more developed than the others in some aspect of policy or procedure. The opportunity was thereby created for the other partners to learn from example. This marketplace of good practice relating to progression of adults is an important outcome of the Adult Compact, and is certainly one that could and should be maintained in the future.

4. A structural analysis of success and failure

Adult students are marginal to the higher education policies of the current British government. The Education White Paper of January 2003, 'The Future of Higher Education', sets out the Government's plans for radical reform of universities and HE colleges (Department for Education and Skills, January 2003). The paper includes proposals for changes in the student finance system, and plans for making HE more accessible to more young people. But it makes almost no mention of adult students. The same is true of the Department for Education and Skills' consultative document of April 2003, 'Widening Participation in Higher Education' (Department for Education and Skills, April 2003). This document describes the Government's plans for establishing an Office for Fair Access (OFFA) and its proposals for action under four headings; Attainment, Aspiration, Applications and Admissions.

The Government's HE participation target that by the year 2010, 50% of those aged between 18 and 30 should have 'the opportunity to benefit' from higher education is predicated not on the conception of a recurrent inter-relationship of higher education with learning throughout life, but on the notion of higher education as a pre-skilling preparation for employment for young people in an economy of increasing vocational complexity. The new special joint initiative of the HEFCE and LSC for widening participation activities is called 'Partnerships for Progression' (P4P) (HEFCE 01/73, 02/49 and LSC 02/23). P4P addresses the Government's 50% HE participation target and so is directed towards the same age group (those aged 30 or under). Received opinion is that other recent aspects of higher education policy - students' fees and the debts incurred through student loans - are serious deterrents to the participation of adults in higher education.

Knowledge about the postgraduate employment of older (post-30 years) higher education students is patchy, but again received opinion is that the economy and the professions are structured to the disadvantage of older graduate entrants (Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services 1999). Our culture does not have a functioning concept of the successful older higher education student, temporarily suspending employment or moving on from care for children or other family members, checking in to higher education to acquire higher skills and new perspectives and then graduating to a significantly constructive role in society. No doubt many older adult students do just this, but the culture does not encourage, value or recognise the phenomenon.

In some senses the Lancashire Adult Compact was going against the grain. Its concern was with easing the progression into higher education of a group which was not the object of public policy, whose skills would not necessarily be valued by society and the economy, and who were without prominently visible social role models and pathways to social recognition. The Adult Compact was indeed funded by the HEFCE, and latterly the LSC, but nationally there were not many comparable contemporaneous projects receiving similar funding. The Adult Compact was something of a deviation from the norm.

What then could the Lancashire Adult Compact achieve? The model of operation which it adopted gave tacit recognition to the inappropriateness of macro-objectives. The Adult Compact's objectives were small-scale, achievable, local and, mostly, measurable and based on the identification and recognition of good practice. Such objectives were valid, but begged the question of what really are the drivers of adult progression into higher education. For, largely, they are not local and small-scale. They are to do with public policy, structural relationships in the economy and society, financial support, and the cultural value placed by society upon the adult higher education student.(there is a considerable debate on this topic. Edwards, 1997, is a relevant starting point).

The Lancashire Adult Compact goes on, although it has come to the end of its funded period. It will continue to be supported, in a reduced manner, by Lancaster University Department of Continuing Education for at least some time into the future. Goodwill remains in the four partner universities and colleges, the OCNW and the network of Lancashire further education colleges. In addition to the work which will be continued through Partnerships for Progression, there have been public commitments by partners to finish some of the work on issues which the Adult Compact has uncovered.

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