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Flexibility and Widening Participation

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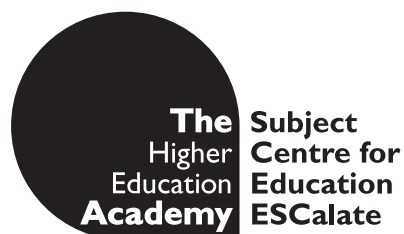
Flexibility and Widening Participation

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Introduction to this publication

This paper is in two parts:

Part One

Professor Michael Osborne introduces us to the concepts of Flexibility and Widening Participation, in the process highlighting a number of key issues such as in-reach, out-reach and flexibility, giving an overview of current offerings.

Part Two

Dr Derek Young takes those initial themes and explores them in further detail using a number of 'in practice' examples.

Contents

Part One

5

Flexibility and Widening Participation

Professor Michael Osborne

Introduction	5
The indirect approach	6
In-reach	7
Out-reach	8
Flexibility	9
<i>Modularity and CATS</i>	9
<i>Distance Education and ICT</i>	10
<i>Recognition and accreditation of prior (experiential) learning</i>	10
Raising aspirations or structural modifications?	11
References and Bibliography	13

Part Two

16

Widening Participation through Flexibility, In-reach and Out-reach

Dr Derek Young

Introduction	17
Flexibility	17
In-reach	19
Out-reach	21
Blended learning	22
Conclusion	23
References	24

Part One

Flexibility and Widening Participation

Professor Michael Osborne

Introduction

In the field of widening participation within the UK and beyond, there is now a proliferation of activity that is labelled as 'access'. In the late 1970s when Access to Higher Education first became a significant part of educational provision, matters were simpler. At that time activity centred on adults¹ and, more specifically, focus was on minority ethnic groups and their under-representation within particular vocational areas, including social work and teaching. My archives from the 1980s, collecting dust in all corners of my office, reveal a plethora of Access to Teaching programmes across the UK², and no doubt the survival and expansion of many departments of Education was due to their adult intake. The main debates during these decades were around standards (DES, 1985) of what became known as the 'third route' into Higher Education (HE) (Davies and Parry, 1993) and more prosaic internal debates amongst advocates of the distinction between 'access' and 'Access'. The former referred to any form of provision that facilitated entry whereas 'Access' very specifically signified specialist courses for adults developed at least initially as a response to a DES (1978) invitation to institutions and local education authorities to develop such provision.

Almost three decades later, the scale of activity in the field of widening participation has increased enormously, reflecting the expansion of the HE system as a whole. A variety of concerns at national and institutional level related to factors including economic competitiveness, demographic change and institutional survival from the late 1980s onwards has seen widening participation to HE become fore-grounded in policy, particularly since the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997), other comparable reports of the same year (Fryer, 1997; Kennedy, 1997) and the subsequent Green Paper, *The Learning Age* (DfEE, 1998). Furthermore there has been an extensive shift away from the target group of adults towards school-leavers, and to even younger age-groups on the basis that early awareness and aspiration-raising is more effective in reaching the lowest socio-economic groups, who are still disproportionately represented in HE. It is now clearly the inclusion of representative proportions of young people from all strata of society within Higher Education that is the major imperative of the UK government (DfES 2003a and b and 2004). The essential problem is revealed in a recent report by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE, 2005); the most advantaged 20 per cent of young people are up to six times more likely to enter Higher Education than the most disadvantaged 20

¹ See for example *Royal Society (1988)*

² See for example *ILEA (1988)*

per cent. Despite a range of widening participation initiatives, the evidence suggests that these have failed to affect participation significantly in Higher Education by young people from lowest socio-economic groups and from geographically isolated areas.

Using the historic terminology, it is now 'access' that dominates, but in order to understand and classify the various forms of provision that now exist, a somewhat more sophisticated typology is needed. It is argued that there is now a more sophisticated approach to widening participation that is reflected in considering the whole student lifecycle (Layer et al, 2002). Thus initiatives extend from awareness-raising, through admission to retention and employability. In this account, I aim to overview ways in which it is possible to classify activities within the remit of widening participation and how boundaries can be drawn around the various forms that initiatives take. I will focus specifically on flexible provision, namely that activity that is concerned with making the curriculum more accessible through changes in its structure, and in form, place and timing of delivery. Provision such as use of Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL), Open and Distance Learning (ODL), the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) come under the aegis of flexibility.

In terms of how best to conceptualise and categorise initiatives that have been designed with the direct purpose of widening participation in order to make them more amenable to further analysis, a recent report from Universities Scotland (2001) on access in Scottish HEIs is useful. Institutional developments are described in terms of how they address three issues affecting access and retention: *academic* (raising entry

qualifications); *cultural* (raising awareness); and *internal* (changing institutional structures). Another distinction provided by Toyne (1990, pp. 63-65) is also helpful. He has categorised two broad types of access initiative – initiatives that focus on people “getting in” to HE, and access initiatives that emphasise the staff of universities “getting out” of the campus into the community to reach people underrepresented in HE. In a recent study on widening participation, these two types have been defined as *in-reach* and *out-reach* respectively (Murphy et al, 2002). A number of initiatives, however, can neither be categorised primarily as in- or out-reach, and have more to do with transformations and adjustments to the structure, administration and delivery of HE programmes and are referred to in the same study broadly as *flexible* access initiatives.

The indirect approach

Certain forms of activity do provide access to the Higher Education curriculum, but have not expressly been designed as a direct route to Higher Education qualifications. These include specific programmes directed towards adults, some forms of 'awareness raising' and the fundamental re-structuring of both school and vocational curricula³.

The indirect approach towards adults is perhaps exemplified by the extra-mural tradition in the UK and its more recent manifestation in an accredited form. These short courses provide completely open access and offer opportunities for those who have an interest in academic knowledge to experience a HE curriculum⁴. However, their purpose is not directly related to facilitating access to mainstream HE

³ A fuller account of these issues is found in Osborne (2003a and b)

⁴ My emphasis is based on the fact that although in the UK these courses are given a credit rating, there is little evidence that the credit so achieved is transferable to the traditional undergraduate qualification, the first degree

qualifications, and with a few notable exceptions have disappeared from the landscape of HE (see Osborne and Thomas, 2003).

Other interventions are even less direct as, for instance, is the case with parent education, which tends to be prevalent in southern Europe (see Cases and Lopez, 1996), though are indirectly being integrated into UK provision as a side-effect of some aspiration-raising schemes. Many of the initiatives currently being funded in the UK are about partnership amongst providers in different sectors and aspiration-raising amongst young people is certainly to the fore, some of this occurring as early as during the final years of primary education. In England, for example, the *Aim Higher* initiative promotes regional and sub-regional partnerships between HEIs, schools, colleges and employers to promote interest and support progression into HE. Partnerships are required to increase participation in each area and to address low rates of participation by students from lower socio-economic groups, low participation neighbourhoods and of individuals with disabilities. The argument is that in order to address deep-seated inequalities and to break down inter-generational inheritance of inequity, interventions must occur as early as possible. Early intervention also, of course, has its advocates amongst economists since there is arguably greater efficiency in targeting resources towards measures during early years of schooling that pre-empt poor levels of progression to HE rather than remediate its effects in later years.

Many other initiatives in the UK take such an approach. In Scotland, for example, compacts between schools and universities, within which structured arrangements for interchanges are planned

for pupils from their early years in secondary education, are seen as strategies to create the perception that HE is a possibility that may have seemed infeasible or had not been considered. Some initiatives of this kind, such as the Widening Health Access Programme (WHAP) co-ordinated at the University of Glasgow, focus on particular disciplines that are particularly hard to access such as medicine where skewing of participation by socio-economic class is particularly acute (BMA, 2004).

In-reach

The category of forms described as in-reach refer to those actions of Higher Education associated with improving supply, by creating new ways for students to access existing provision. These include alternative entry tests for adults, customised courses and other procedures that allow a second opportunity to demonstrate potential often accompanied by relaxation of entry requirements. The degree to which these arrangements represent radical departures from standard practices and a real commitment to openness is quite variable. The use of special entry tests is rare in the UK, and was largely the preserve of the most elite institutions and there are no equivalents of the French Special University Entrance Examination (*Examen Spécial d'Entrée à l'Université* (l'ESEU)), later the *Diplôme d'Accès aux Etudes Universitaires* (DAEU) for adults who do not complete the Baccalaureat at school (Davies, 1999) or of the Spanish system with its *Prueba de acceso a la universidad para mayores de 25 años* (Ortega and Camara, 2001). Many argue that this form of 'second chance' is largely a replication of the traditional school-leaving examinations, is culturally specific (Bourgeois and Frenay, 2001) and has not been

attuned to the needs of adult aspirants.

There is, however, a debate about the potential merits of certain forms of alternative testing in the selection process using indicators other than academic knowledge as demonstrated through performance, especially in relation to entry to elite professions. For example, following very public discussions about entry to medicine, there is now consideration of the supplementing of traditional academic grades as a selection criteria with a range of psychometric tests based on the Australian Personal Quality Assessment (PQA) (see Bore et al, 2005a and b; Lumsden et al, 2005; Munro et al, 2005 and Powis et al, 2005). These include the assessment of problem solving skills, moral and ethical reasoning as well as personality characteristics such as empathy, self-confidence, aloofness and narcissism. For example, the academic requirements for admission to the Guy's, Kings', and St Thomas's (GKT) Extended Medical Degree Programme (EMDP) includes the PQA, and the WHAP is aiming to extend the coverage of its psychometric testing procedures to school-age groups. More generally, the Sutton Trust has proposed the piloting of a US-style Scholastic Ability Tests (SATs) as a potential common test for use in the UK (see MacDonald et al, 2001), and the Schwartz Report on *Fair Admissions to Higher Education* (DfES, 2004, p.11) has reported that if 'proposed research concludes that a national test of potential would offer significant benefits, the Steering Group urges the Government to grasp this opportunity as it responds to the Tomlinson proposals for curriculum reform'.

Customised courses, the Access with a capital 'A', still of course exist as a *Second Chance*, but in a mass system there is less emphasis on the very specific targeting of the late 1970s either to participant, vocation or curriculum planning.

Out-reach

Widening participation in the out-reach mode is concerned with collaboration and partnership. Various forms of university partnership with schools, communities and employers allow HEIs to engage actively with underrepresented groups and the socially excluded outside their own boundaries. The primary objective of such out-reach initiatives is to target individuals who believe HE is 'not for them'. A strong element therefore in out-reach is the attempt to counter dispositional barriers by creating greater awareness of what might be possible, and thereby stimulating new demand. Much of this work could be described as a *First Chance* for those groups who have been traditionally excluded from Higher Education.

The forms that such collaborations take are multi-faceted, and have been described and analysed in an international context in a number of recent publications (Woodrow and Thomas, 2002; Woodrow, 2002; Murphy et al, 2002; Osborne, 2003b). Woodrow and Thomas (2002) present a four-fold typology of collaboration based on studies from Australia, Ireland, the Netherlands and the US which they describe as the vertical, longitudinal, all-embracing and integrated versions. The vertical model refers to strategies that better facilitate direct entry from a particular sector to HE, as is exemplified in the links between Further Education Colleges and Universities in the UK (Morgan-Klein and Murphy, 2002) and various models of workplace learning (Brennan and Little, 1996). The longitudinal model does not focus solely on HE as an outcome, but seeks 'to achieve for its target group a continuum of cross-sector learning opportunities stretching from primary education into employment' (Woodrow and Thomas, 2002, p.13). Their all-embracing model refers to a regional strategy that encompasses

multiple players and many dimensions from primary schools through to universities. It is distinguished from previous models not only by the breadth of partnership, but also by the extent of the involvement of all stakeholders including those seeking access in the process itself and by seeking to change the nature of supply. Integration refers to those models where institutional barriers have (at least ostensibly) been dissolved, and most obviously these are evident in those countries such as Australia where in some Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Colleges and Universities have been integrated to form a common post-16 dual-mode system (see Wheelan and Moodie, 2005). There are obvious advantages to such strategies since much evidence points to substantial barriers existing at points of institutional transition.

Flexibility

Flexibility and out-reach have common elements as is evident in links between Vocational Education and Training (VET) and universities. Flexibility implies significant structural modification in systems, which may or may not be accompanied by collaboration, although in many cases it is a facilitating mechanism. Flexibility in the context of widening participation refers to both spatial and temporal matters, namely changes that allow students access to education in locations and modes, and at times that, to at least a certain degree, are of individuals' rather than institutions' choosing. It also refers to those mechanisms that challenge constructions of what constitutes knowledge at Higher Education level and

the means by which knowledge can be acquired and demonstrated, such as the recognition and accreditation of prior (experiential) learning (R/AP(E)L), and programmes of independent study, with to quote Percy and Ramsden (1980, p.15) 'its stress on weakened boundaries between subject areas, on supra-disciplinary concepts, and on student control over the way in which knowledge is transmitted'.

Modularity and CATS

The move to modular forms of higher education, in which distinct elements of credit can be accumulated both horizontally at a given level and vertically through levels, provides an obvious form of flexibility. There are examples of degrees that have been constructed in part-time mode, in workplaces and other off-campus locations and through distance education, often using new forms of digital technologies. In some cases schemes may consist of a multiplicity of these elements. However, many of these forms of flexibility are at the margins of institutional efforts, especially in those HEIs with strong research-driven missions.

It is modularity and the credit accumulation and transfer systems (CATS⁵) that constitute the structural backbone of these forms of flexibility. However, as Trow (1999, p.315) has commented, when comparing US and European universities, the latter 'move slowly towards modular courses and the accumulation of course credits, and even more slowly to credit transfer'. Furthermore, whilst there is much rhetoric in the direction of structural flexibility to

⁵ See for example SCQF (2003)

facilitate mobility, driven by a national policy agenda and at a European level by the Bologna Declaration of 1999 (re-emphasised in the recent Bergen Communique of 2005), practice in the UK has perhaps led to an unintended effect. I will cite simply the realities of credit transfer in Scotland where greatest progress has been achieved in implementing a flexible credit framework, and where Further Education Colleges (FECs) are a major supplier of HE provision.

In a recent study (Osborne and Maclaurin, 2002), we generated unambiguous evidence of the skewing of transfer from FECs to HEIs, particularly in relation to Higher National Certificate/Diploma (HNC/D) articulation to degree level study in Scotland. Quite clearly there is a predominance of involvement in such relationships of the post 1992 universities, and this has resulted in disproportionate numbers of former FEC students entering such institutions. Whilst undoubtedly in so doing these institutions are creating greater opportunity, particularly for those from traditionally non-participant groups, there are also dangers that the articulation arrangements themselves lead to a funnelling of certain types of students into one particular type of institution. Such a potential 'ghettoisation' effect has been commented upon previously (Osborne et al, 2000; Thanki and Osborne, 2000; Morgan-Klein, 2003 and Field, 2004). Not only does this phenomenon reduce the options of type of institution to which students may progress, but it also narrows the discipline areas to which access may be gained, and to subsequent career opportunities. This particular channel of progression could be viewed as simply the re-enforcement of earlier school to tertiary education transitions that are skewed according to socio-economic disadvantage.

Distance education and ICT

The creation of distance education universities as a means of combating lack of educational opportunity for reasons including geographical location, disability (CEDEFOP, 2001), and employment and home circumstances has a long history. A prevailing discourse within lifelong learning is that of flexibility of provision, on meeting students' needs at times and places of their own (or their employers') choosing. The availability of open and distance learning opportunities based on the use of information and communication (ICT) would therefore seem to be especially important in achieving this flexibility. However, there appear within the UK, with the notable exception of the Open University, relatively few examples of ICT being used as a strategy for securing 'second chances'. Early technological failings and the cost of access to telephony led to a lack of confidence in the potential of ICT. It is perhaps only with the coming of relatively cheap forms of fast electronic information retrieval and synchronous communications through broadband that its pedagogical capacity will be achieved. It is also notable that within the UK there exists no comparator to the dual mode universities of Australia, which offer both face-to-face and distance provision or combinations of the two.

Recognition and accreditation of prior (experiential) learning

In some national settings, for example South Africa, the recognition and accreditation of prior (experiential) learning (R/AP(E)L) has been described as having a potential role in radical social transformation (see Michelson, 1997). In France *La Validation D'Acquis de la Experience* (VAE) presents fundamental challenges to the structure of traditional

higher education qualifications such the *diplôme* (Davies, 1999). Feutrie (2000) in the French context see VAE as a radical challenge as to the nature and locus of knowledge; a challenge to institutions to recognise the diversity of people's opportunities for learning, and perhaps as a consequence, a potential challenge to address the discriminatory effects of the social and economic divisions embedded in society's institutions, and their values. That said even in France, as Feutrie and Gallacher (2003) have argued, schemes of VAE have largely failed in their assault on traditional structures, and there have been many disappointments in the success of work-based schemes with considerable lack of commitment from companies. In the UK, everyone concerned with widening participation will have heard of APEL, but in practice most will not have implemented access using the tools it offers.

Raising aspirations or structural modifications?

In my view, simply raising aspirations within the school years is unlikely to be enough to create greater equity unless accompanied by the implementation rather than simply the espousal of flexibility. The logic of aspiration-raising is inescapable, though it remains to be proven whether early intervention will make a fundamental difference to the participation of under-represented groups. Even if these initiatives inspire and create new demand, this will need to be accompanied by structural modifications of systems and greater commitment to flexibility than current rather piecemeal arrangements. A number of models from other parts of the world may offer suggestions as to how flexibility can be implemented more equitably and systematically.

The components of flexibility exist in modularity, CATS, articulation and in part-time, distance and ICT-based programmes, APEL and independent study, and some of these forms of provision have been in place for decades. However each form is available only in certain UK institutions for certain types of provision. Essentially the full-time, face-to-face, daytime mode dominates with minor modifications for today's mass system of HE. Douglass (2004, p.28) in comparing the UK system with that of the US, and specifically California argues that 'the UK system seems much less than the sum of its parts – in its bifurcated and decentralised organisation of FE and independently chartered universities, in the lack of a collective sense of purpose...' This is contrasted with the public tripartite system of California with its community colleges, state university system and the University of California, each playing a distinct role within the state's system. I have commented elsewhere (Osborne, 2005) on the distinctive role of the Community College sector in North America, where unlike FECs in the UK, they can be clearly viewed as part of a stratified system of HE with different institutions playing particular roles in an overall system. The important features of the systems of Canada and the US are clarity of role and the nature of the curriculum. Community Colleges (or their equivalents) in many North American jurisdictions have a much clearer transfer role, and have a curriculum offer that maps clearly onto the first two years of university study. Although there are exceptions, the model of articulation does not depend on re-purposing vocationally-oriented provision that does not match the requirements of university study. The need for better matching of curriculum to create confidence in transfer to all parts of the university sector may be vital to the creation of improved pathways of progression from FE to HE in

the UK. Many individuals who come from backgrounds where participation in HE is not a tradition are likely to be attracted by the features offered by the short-cycle provisions of FECs, namely locality, modularity, flexibility in duration and sub-degree exit points. But many are also looking for transfer with full respect for credit achieved to a full range of HEIs and this is yet to be achieved.

Flexibility in the sense of being able to study (at least formally) as a part-time student or to interchange part-time and full-time status at different periods of a university career; to combine face-to-face and distance study, to gain credit for learning outside the academy through systematic processes of APEL seem more distant prospects for the post-compulsory system as a whole. Can we envisage, for example, the notion of the right for an individual to have her/his claims for experiential learning to be assessed by a university as enshrined in French Higher Education law (see Pouget and Osborne, 2004)?

Caveats must be added of course when using international models as comparators. Douglass (2004, p. 25), for example, also quotes the high attrition rates of California, and attributes this to 'perhaps over dependence on funnelling students to the lowest cost institutions'. In Australia, where boundaries between TAFE and universities have been broken down in the

dual sector institutions, problems of transfer have not disappeared as a range of internal barriers to collaboration between the two arms of these institutions appear to emerge (Chapman et al, 2000).

And lest we become too enthusiastic about structural modification and widening participation through using the armoury of flexibility, here are some final sobering thoughts. The expansion of educational opportunity in itself may not reduce inequality by social class in educational achievement (Shavit et al, 2004; Raftery and Hout, 1993). It has been argued that within stratified systems, as the less selective part of the HE sector expands its numbers, there is skewing of participation by social class (Lucas, 2001).

As our HE system becomes universal, certainly individuals from lower socio-economic classes will inevitably participate in greater numbers. However they will do so with greatest frequency in less elite institutions, and at the same time elite HEIs are likely to become more selective. There will be a meritocratic justification for this development, but there is also an argument that the lack of flexible pathways through the most elite of institutions contributes to their narrow social-class profile. In part two of this account, consideration will be given to how provision within the field of Education can be mapped against these models of flexibility⁶.

⁶ I am grateful to Dr Derek Young for his comments on this account, and anticipate his contribution to part 2

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Part Two

Widening Participation through Flexibility, In-reach and Out-reach

Dr Derek Young

In Part 1 of this paper, Mike Osborne introduced us to the concepts of flexibility and widening participation, in the process highlighting a number of key issues such as *in-reach*, *out-reach* and flexibility and giving an overview of the current offerings. In Part 2 we take those initial themes and explore them in further detail using a number of in practice examples¹.

¹ While this paper uses a number of current representative examples to give a flavour they do not represent all courses available
I would like to thank Professor Mike Osborne for his helpful comments and suggestions

Introduction

One fundamental problem in addressing the issue of flexibility in education is in the definition given to flexibility. Rigmor George and Rosemary Luke highlight flexibility from an institutional perspective:

The challenge for universities is to reconceptualise the institutional structures and work practices of staff in order to reform the educational environment in ways which are student centred, resource rich and which make use of the technologies available for distribution and access.

(George and Luke, 1995)

Mike Osborne gives us an alternative, student centred, definition:

Flexibility in the context of widening participation refers to both spatial and temporal matters, namely changes that allow students access to education in locations and modes, and at times that, to at least a certain degree, are of individuals' rather than institutions' choosing.

(Osborne, 2006)

The common thread which is clear in both definitions is the certainty that flexibility needs to be learner focused, attending to the needs and aspirations of the learner rather than demands for institutional efficiency.

In order to meet these learner needs, hand in hand with the concept of flexibility are the twin themes of in-reach and out-reach. Each term refers to interaction with learners in a manner best suited to the needs and aspirations of the learners themselves, with in-reach seen as providing diversity in encouraging students into the learning environment while out-reach is concerned with expanding the learning environment.

Flexibility

For many, flexibility is taken to represent part-time study which in turn is taken to mean half-time or segmental study of a traditional course, adapting what is there rather than designing from scratch. Inevitably, part-time means long-term study. A PGCE Primary Education course taken part-time at the University of Brighton may involve three years study and commitment instead of one year when taken as full-time study. A BA (Hons) Early Years Education course at the University of Chester, taught on one afternoon and evening per week, takes four years to complete. The University of Dundee Teaching Certificate in Education may require 72 weeks part-time compared to 36 weeks full-time.

However, I would argue that flexibility should be focused on the delivery of full-time education through an adaptive mode rather than providing part-time long-term study. This would undoubtedly require a change in mindset within the education sector to meet the learner needs highlighted above.

At best, current flexible delivery within the field of education is 'blended', containing only a degree of flexibility – a hybrid provision which has been designed to provide flexibility to a specific student base and is restricted by the demands of subject and registration. Perhaps that should be the focus within the sector – not measuring flexibility in education against generic flexible provision but against the restrictive practices inherent in the traditional delivery of education – adapting and overcoming current restrictions in time and location (place).

In fairness, the nature of many courses delivered within higher education dictates a regulated delivery due to the need for subject interaction. In the field of education for example, the requirement to undertake school based training and mentoring by 'in practice' teaching staff restricts flexibility in delivery. In essence, restrictions on flexibility are inherent within the subject.

There is a certain inevitability in the patterns of flexible delivery currently found within the field of education, clearly highlighted by the current learner requirement to fulfil 'work or school placements' in order to gain experience of both pupils and school environment. This is perhaps the one factor in the delivery of education studies which is wholly restrictive and prevents true flexibility.

The practice of school placements is for many, primarily those in employment, the single most limiting factor towards delivering a truly flexible provision, although many departments and schools are endeavouring to overcome this restriction as best they can under current requirements. For example, the PGCE (P) part-time and distance learning programme and PGCE (S) delivered through the School of Education at the University

of Aberdeen, are designed to widen access to teacher education in rural areas by delivering and supporting most of the academic content online. However, with the same standards of entry as the full-time course and while learners can and do undertake the majority of study through an online learning environment, the requirement to undertake an initial three week induction in Aberdeen in year one and a one week requirement in year two of the course, plus face to face sessions within the participating local authority area, limits the move towards total flexibility in terms of place. In this case the restriction of school placement is addressed to a certain extent by locating the placements within the students' local authority area. While delivery in this instance goes some way to address learner-led flexibility by removing the need for the learner to move away from home while training, there is still the need for individuals to conform to traditional work placement restrictions.

The PGCE Early Years Flexible Route offered at the University of Central England, Birmingham, consists of part-time study requiring attendance at the institution one evening per week and one Saturday per month. The course also requires an initial five week diagnostic teaching practice and an eight week final teaching practice involving full-time attendance at a partner school. Similarly the PGCE (Flexible Route) offered at the University of Chester includes 24 weeks placement in school. The Teaching Certificate in Education at University of Dundee is credited with being delivered through part-time study but half the duration of the course is spent in school placement with the other half spent in 'a combination of in-faculty learning and online distance learning'. Similarly, with the need to complete a six week school placement, the Teacher Training PGCE (Secondary Flexible) at the School of Education, University of Gloucestershire,

is focused towards flexibility in modular choice and provision not flexibility in learner needs. Although the PGCE Modular Flexible programme at Canterbury is designed to be taken independently from a distance, there are still compulsory face-to-face tutorials and 10 days of taught sessions during the programme, while students without the necessary classroom experience are expected to undertake school placements.

In order to achieve true flexibility in education studies, an alternative to 'traditional' school placements needs to be found. Students could undertake the academic part of their training through true flexible delivery and then spend the first six months of their working career as a 'trainee or intern' in the true sense – undertaking a paid, employment-based, initial training period. In this model, the school placements become part of their employment not part of their education training. In Scotland at least, current provision by the Scottish Executive of a guaranteed one year placement at the end of training (Teach in Scotland 2006) could be changed to a guaranteed six month 'internship' at the end of their academic course followed by a 'ringfenced' teaching year. As an intern they would be paid a salary and progressively adopt a heavier teaching load – this would be in effect the beginning of their teaching career and would remove the requirement for in house vocational training from the study cycle to the working cycle. Schools could then 'train up' interns to their own needs and particular working methods. This would provide, or allow for the provision of, true flexible delivery within the field of education – removing the current time and place restrictions. There is a case for moving to change the timing of classroom placement – it is no good introducing flexibility in the academic section without introducing it in the vocational section. At the very least moving all

placements to the end of the course would introduce a greater degree of learner flexibility.

Increasingly adopted as a recognition of academic ability, Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) provides academic credits awarded on the basis of certified learning, usually from a defined programme of study while Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) is defined as academic credits awarded on the basis of informal non-certified learning gained from experience, including life and work experiences and is valued as a means of recognising the value of professional learning. This recognition of the value of professional learning is encouraged by the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS, 2006).

The School of Education, University of Hertfordshire, accredits prior learning as part of an alternative degree route with the accreditation process costing £100. A further example of APEL can be found at The University of Birmingham which offers a Certificate in Higher Education (Autistic Spectrum Disorders), delivered online and by video material on CD-ROM, and which has as its entry requirements experience in the field of ASD – normally seen as two years working in the field of ASD, rather than formal educational qualifications.

In-reach

In-reach has been variously described as those actions intended to expand existing ways for learners to access provision, or create new means of access, including the introduction of alternative entry tests for adults, relaxed entry requirements, customised courses, and any other procedure designed to offer learners a second chance at higher education (Osborne, 2006).

There are a number of alternative entry avenues open to the learner although they are not universally available in terms of institution or course. One non-traditional route into teaching covers those students who have gained an HND or equivalent and wish to progress from a college of Further Education onto a full degree course. The BA (Hons) in Early Childhood Education Studies delivered at Faculty of Education, University of Central England, Birmingham, was implemented to fill this role and is popular, both with learners who are in employment and with employers who are willing to release learners for study days. The means of delivery is afternoon extending into evening over two years during which part-time learners study alongside full-time students for some of their modules.

Individual training plans are increasingly being used as one area of flexible entry but they still restrict learner choice to available delivery. The University of Aberdeen offers flexibility in both entry and exit points dependent on previous experience while at the University of Central England at Birmingham, the PGCE Early Years Flexible Route is one example where an Individual Needs Analysis (INA) determines the precise content and duration of the course – offering the possibility of a shortened course. Similarly, within the Faculty of Education and Sport, University of Brighton, the BA Professional Studies in Primary Education allows learners to develop an individual training plan that determines the pattern and length of study. The plan takes into account an individual's range and quality of academic expertise, professional experience and personal circumstances.

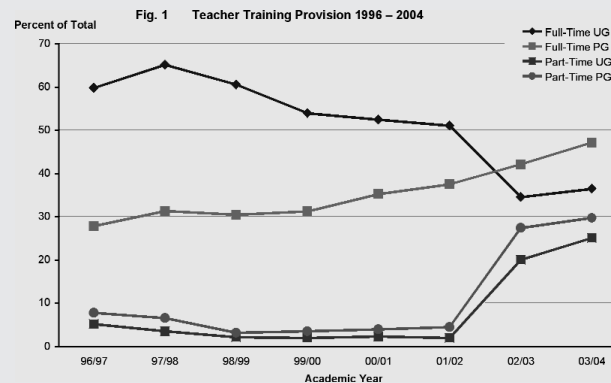
A great many courses are aimed at those who are already in employment and are taught on a part-time basis or on weekday evenings to accommodate existing commitments.

The students all study on a part-time basis. They come here one afternoon and evening a week. Many of them have to juggle the commitment of work, home and study as well as funding the course themselves. This exemplifies the commitment these students have to their own personal development.

(Sylvia Dodds, Course Tutor and Programme Manager, Bradford College)

Within the field of Education, the expansion of part-time provision, allied with increased flexibility in delivery and a recognition of alternative learning ability, has in part overcome subject specific restrictions and is seen by many as one means of widening participation across the sector.

As shown in Figure 1, part-time provision between 1996/7 and 2001/2 was consistently less than ten per cent of the total number of students undertaking teacher training. In 2001/2 part-time provision stood at only 3.5 per cent of all UK students on Teacher Training courses, with 1140 studying part-time and 31915 on full-time undergraduate courses. By the following year, 2002/03, in response to government and Teacher Training Agency initiatives to expand part-time and flexible provision, the number of students on part-time study had increased significantly to 12485, an increase of almost tenfold, while full-time provision had suffered a corresponding decrease to 21585, a drop of over 32 per cent. By 2003/04, more than half of new entrants to teaching were aged 25 or above and over one third aged 30 or above with part-time students accounting for 36.3 per cent of Teacher Training students.



The part-time PGCE Early Years at the School of Education at Bath Spa University is designed to allow those ‘who wish to do so to maintain a part-time job or other commitments’. It highlights the requirements for learners to attend centre-based training or serial school days only for a maximum of two or three days per week – from 9:00am to 2:30pm, except when on school experience placements. For those taking the part-time route there is one day per week for 12 weeks followed by two blocks of seven and eight weeks of full-time commitment. Similarly, the Early Years (3-7) part-time course towards a PGCE in Primary Education is designed so that ‘participants will only have to attend centre-based training or serial school days for three days a week’. Like the PGCE (P) part-time and distance learning programme and PGCE (S) delivered through the School of Education at the University of Aberdeen mentioned earlier, this course also takes account of trainees’ personal circumstances and tries to place trainees’ school experiences close to their home – reducing the reliance on transport. Within the Faculty of Education and Sport, University of Brighton, the BA Professional Studies in Primary Education is delivered one day per week and Saturdays over a period of two and a half years. At the University of Central England at Birmingham, the PGCE Early Years Flexible Route part-time is one evening per week and one Saturday per month over two years plus a five week and eight week teaching practice.

Utilising available space, so called twilight sessions are held at present 5-8pm or 6-9pm but one easy test of flexibility might be 6-9am sessions targeting those learners who are using flexible delivery to provide a transition or change of skills and who have commitments after school hours. It might be easier for a teaching assistant to find the required time before, rather than after, work. Similarly 4-6pm or 4-7pm might better fit, with the start time linking with end of school day.

Out-reach

Collaboration and partnership are the aims of out-reach, highlighting the emergence of university partnerships with schools, communities and employers and actively engaging with underrepresented groups and the socially excluded outside their own boundaries (Osborne, 2006).

One of the main aims is to recruit from a wide cross section of society. Within this cross section we hope to recruit members of the minority ethnic groups and men.

(Sylvia Dodds, Course Tutor and Programme Manager, Bradford College)

One positive aspect of widening participation within higher education is the number of courses delivered to allow teaching assistants to progress through to qualified teacher status. Within these courses there is fixed use of existing resources – one or two days per week – designed to allow teaching assistants to follow one possible route into registered teacher status while remaining in existing employment.

The School of Education at the University of Birmingham delivers courses which are web based, web supported, distance education paper based and part-time. The school also teaches off campus and provides validation to providers off campus. Similarly, the University of Birmingham Certificate in Higher Education previously mentioned as having flexibility in entry also offers flexibility in space, as the course is available in the UK, the Channel Islands, Ireland and is currently being piloted in Sweden. The Dip. HE in Youth and Community Work at the Centre for Youth Work Studies, Brunel University is offered at a number of locations around the country and is delivered as a hybrid – part taught, part distance and in London on Saturdays. While the BA in Early Childhood Studies (BAECS) School of Education, University of Aberdeen, is structured to be taken while working full or part-time, the main method of delivery is through open learning. The Department of Education, University of Bath, delivers through a variety of methods – distance learning (folder of learning materials), attendance at university taught sessions (alongside full-time learners), and, more importantly in terms of flexibility of space, summer schools are held at a number of Study Centres world wide: Brussels (Belgium), Shanghai (China), Vienna (Austria), Bangkok (Thailand), Singapore.

With no sports hall at the School of Education, Bath Spa University, the Primary and Middle Years PGCE PE courses demonstrate flexibility both in time and space by being taught at a local school. Course sessions are timed to begin at 2:15 and end at 3:15 to fit in with school closure providing one hour with the children in a school setting and is followed with a subsequent two hour practical/theoretical session for trainees only in the school hall/classroom.

The School of Education at University of Gloucestershire offers courses through weekend and twilight sessions which are delivered entirely through outreach on school campuses.

Similarly, The Community University of the Valleys-East works within the community, engaging directly with learners to determine needs, delivering not only locally but at a time to suit school hours and terms and offering 10-credit modules in order to generate inclusion. The programme also aims to react quickly in terms of curriculum change to suit the demand of the learners.

Blended learning

In actuality, a large number of those courses advertising flexibility are delivered through blended learning, a mixture of online, distance learning, evenings, weekends and block placements. One such example of blended delivery is the Faculty of Humanities and Education at University of Hertfordshire which runs a PGCE Primary Flexible Route designed for those whose work and/or care commitments prevent full-time attendance. Delivery is through a mixture of distance learning, online learning and compulsory long weekends. Although not providing a solution to all the inherent problems associated with extending flexibility, blended learning never the less gives learners a degree of flexibility in their choice. In

essence the delivery of blended learning uses a selection of existing provision within existing time constraints. Courses are advertised as having 'various options as to the mode of study – either via distance learning, attending summer school...or study centres' although, by the inclusion, or introduction, of limited options, there is limited flexibility for the learner.

Realistically, the majority, if not all, education courses now available offer at least some degree of blended learning through the use of IT. Some are offered totally online while others use IT as a means of delivery rather than a means of learning. Flexibility inherent, or assumed to be inherent, within the electronic medium does not imply flexibility of subject staff or subject provision, only flexibility of access to online resources. In many instances distance learning is only concerned with the delivery of course materials. While learners can log on to (access) an electronic resource base late in the evening or at weekends, academic or subject specific staff are seldom available at these times. In many instances staff do make themselves available in online discussion groups or tutorials but hours are set and are often limited to a few hours per week to fit with other commitments.

The term blended learning covers a variety of teaching and learning activities and methods which, for the main part, do not require the learner to attend the educational institution. This has a bearing on the types of people who use blended learning – those who, for one reason or another can't access a teaching centre, those who are prevented from attending the centre through financial or social reasons, and those who are studying during work hours or in the workplace. At the University of Hertfordshire the PGCE Primary Flexible Route has been designed for trainees who are prevented from undertaking full-time courses

due to family or work commitments and is delivered through a blended learning process of online, distance learning, VLE and two compulsory long weekends. Similarly, the BA Professional Studies in Primary Education, University of Brighton, is delivered through self-study units and Saturday attendance.

Although online provision is new, distance learning, evenings, weekends and block placements have been around for a few decades and there has always been the ability to take course material and library books home. Flexibility here is the change in mindset and the desire to provide a flexible learning environment for learners.

However, care has to be taken in selecting the most appropriate method of delivery for a particular course. Changing from week day evening to Saturday delivery or introducing a set number of day schools spaced across the academic year, may not only have a knock on effect on attendance but also determine learner enthusiasm.

Conclusion

Flexibility should not be seen as an 'add on' but as the norm. We should be aiming for true flexibility in learner provision with current restrictive conditions being the add on. It is clear that flexibility in the delivery of education studies is currently restricted by a set of clearly defined boundaries of institutional and staff commitment and limited flexibility in terms of timing and availability. True flexibility for the learner would make provision for 24/7 access to subject specific guidance and support. Perhaps the measure of success in terms of flexible delivery is how well does it provide new teachers from previously underrepresented groups and whether it provides flexibility for the learner rather than the provider?

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