

## Flexible learning and its contribution to widening participation: a synthesis of research.

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### Core 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. 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'. (Osborne, 2006, p. 9)

## Alternative definitions

The notion of flexible learning and a flavour of what the term may encompass is provided by HEFCE (2010) who state:

*Flexible learning has become a familiar phrase in higher education (HE) policy. It aims to attract and meet the needs of a wider range of students and stakeholders – including employers – and make full use of the opportunities to enhance learning and teaching offered by learning technology. Flexible learning can take many shapes, including extended or accelerated study.*

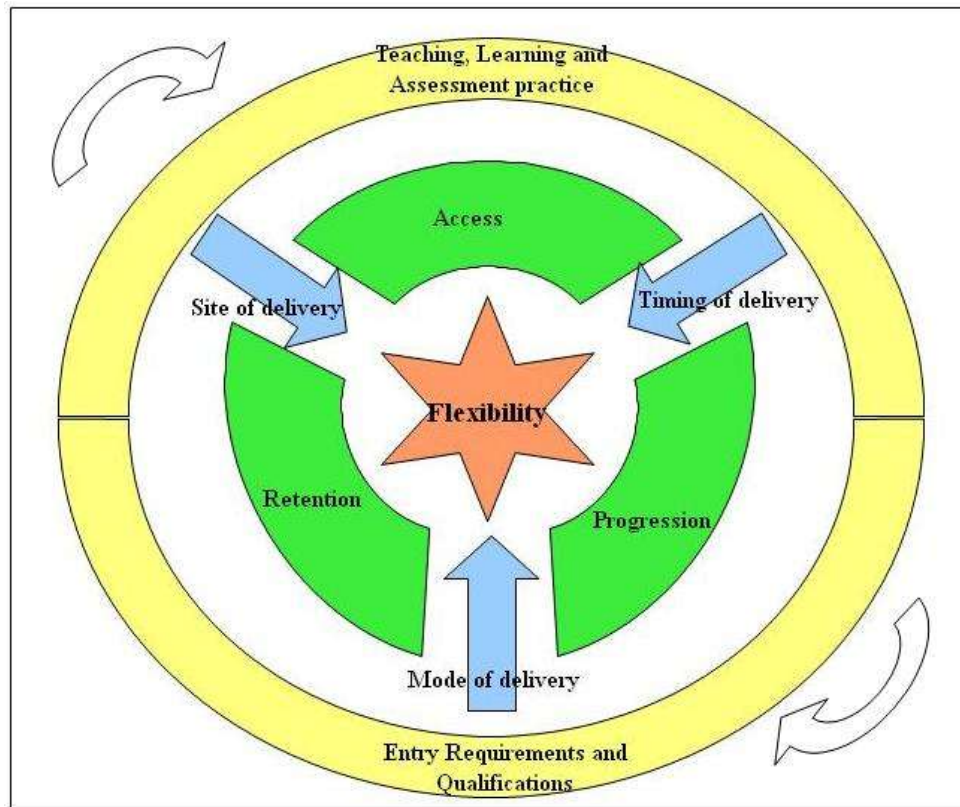
A more comprehensive definition of what flexibility might entail at the institutional level and how it should engage with the learner is provided by Chen (2003, p. 25):

*A commonly accepted definition of flexible learning is that an institution provides students with flexible access to learning experiences in terms of at least one of the following: time, place, pace, learning style, content, assessment and pathways (e.g., Macquarie University, 2001; Browne, 1999; Ling et al., 2001). This definition is based on the view that learning requires the active engagement of students; and that students should be more independent and more responsible for their own learning. That is, flexible learning tends to be student-centred, rather than teacher-centred. Other characteristics of flexible learning include: students' collaboration with peers and/or practitioners in the field, provision of ample resources, the learning experience being context sensitive, and greater emphasis on generic skills (e.g. thinking, meta-cognitive, problem-solving), and the shift of the teacher's role from a source of knowledge to a facilitator throughout the students' journey in learning (e.g., Bridgland & Blanchard, 2001; George & Luke, 1995; University of Sydney, 1999).*

Flexible learning has also developed strong associations with labour market issues since the late 1980s when in the UK a series of Government documents began to emerge (Gallacher and Osborne, 2005) that placed much greater emphasis on the contribution of further and higher education to vocational education and training so that the country could compete more effectively in an increasingly globalised market. In this context the emphasis, in part, was on the flexibility and adaptability of individual workers to combine work and private responsibilities and this theme has continued in ensuing decades in the UK and other industrialised nations (Expert Group on Flexicurity, 2007, p. 13). Increasingly embedded into the rhetoric of lifelong and lifewide learning,

the agenda also placed an onus on educational providers to be flexible. For example, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Education (Cedefop, 2011, p. 47) reported that “financial incentives are helping create an education and training market, which can lead to greater innovation and flexibility among providers and hence more customer-focused provision for sectors, companies and individuals”. The language is that of business and markets but, while the concern expressed is not primarily that of fostering social inclusion, the principles are similar, namely that the supply of educational provision should be both responsive to demand and a stimulator of new demand. In this context it should not be forgotten that widening participation has its roots in providing alternative access to vocationally relevant HE (Department of Education and Science, 1978).

In this review, we have used the graphic presented in Figure 1 to summarise the different elements of flexibility in learning provision as identified in the definitions above and to identify how they may impact on issues of access, retention and progression. Figure 1 is not meant to convey a causal model; it is intended as a graphical representation or heuristic of different elements of flexibility. Flexibility has been placed at the centre of the image, surrounded by the possible outcomes: improved access, retention and progression. On the outside are what might be termed ‘procedural issues’ relating to differing forms of learning and teaching delivery (e.g. blended learning, alternative assessment regimes, e-learning, student- or learner-centred approaches such as personalised learning, peer support/mentoring), and of entry requirements (to include non-traditional qualifications, vocational qualifications, accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL), credit transfer). The arrows outside the circle are meant to imply some form of dynamism. Thus it is suggested that these procedural issues are, or can be, mediated through the arrows indicating site, mode and timing of delivery, which could be termed ‘structural issues’ and which are discussed in more detail in the synthesis that follows.



**Figure 1: Aspects or components of flexibility as they relate to WP**

We will consider each aspect of flexibility in turn in the synthesis section, looking at the available research evidence for their impact on, and implications for, the access, retention and progression of students from under-represented groups.

### Explanatory context

Before moving on to consider the impact of flexible learning on widening participation, it is important to contextualise these efforts within a brief overview of widening participation in the UK. One of the main arguments for widening participation in higher education has been that of social justice (Brennan and Naidoo, 2008). While the term ‘widening participation’ may be relatively new, the idea of education as transformative and as a vehicle for empowerment and social justice is not. An examination of the development of higher education in the 20th century provides plenty of examples of outreach and other activities that sought to widen access to learning specifically among the working class (Fieldhouse, 1977; 1996).

A useful overview of widening participation is offered by Jones (2008), who notes the historical development of WP in the UK, reviews a number of recent key research reports and provides an overview of relevant policy. The reports reviewed contain a mix of empirical research from

both qualitative and quantitative perspectives, policy reviews and case studies. Issues reviewed include not only the participation but also the attainment and progression of under-represented groups. Jones concludes with a brief summary of some of the ways in which policy and practice differ in the constituent parts of the UK, including, for example, differences in outreach activities, funding mechanisms and target groups, although since its publication significant further changes have been implemented by the funding councils for HE.

In the context of this research synthesis, the following definition, provided by the ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme, gives a good overview of what is typically meant by widening participation. It is a broader definition than some, encompassing notions of both improved access and success for students from under-represented and diverse social, educational and geographical backgrounds. It does, however, reflect the 'direction of travel' in the sector in policy terms:

*Widening participation is taken to mean extending and enhancing access to and experience of HE, and achievement within HE, of people from so-called under-represented and diverse social backgrounds, families, groups and communities and positively enabling such people to participate in and benefit from various types of HE. These could include people from socially disadvantaged families and/or deprived geographical areas, including deprived remote, rural and coastal areas or from families that have no prior experience of HE. Widening participation is also concerned with diversity in terms of ethnicity, gender, disability and social background in particular HE disciplines, modes and institutions. In addition it can also include access and participation across the ages, extending conceptions of learning across the life course, and in relation to family responsibilities, particularly by gender and maturity. (TLRP, 2005, p. 1).*

Certain key themes in the landscape of higher education may be seen to frame the concerns of the synthesis that seeks to look at the evidence for the extent to which flexible learning – in all its various manifestations – might/does support increased and successful participation in HE by those historically under-represented in the sector (and/or mitigate the potentially negative effects of systemic change). These themes include:

#### **(i) Expansion in participation**

The difficulties in achieving genuine widening participation, as opposed to simply an increase in overall student numbers, provides a backdrop to the

questions raised in this review of the research relating to how flexible learning can make a meaningful contribution to widening participation.

Between 1995-96 and 2007-08, full-time numbers increased by over 25% across the UK as a whole and by almost 20% in Scotland. Over the same period the percentage increases in part-time numbers were much greater. Notably in Scotland, part-time enrolments rose by 280%. Despite this expansion in participation, two main barriers remain consistently problematic at undergraduate level and beyond, namely disability and low socio-economic status. As a result the perceptions and experiences of disabled students and issues of access and participation of those from lower socio-economic groups remain firmly on the agenda (e.g. Riddell, Tinklin and Wilson, 2005; Riddell et al., 2007; Iannelli, 2007; PAC, 2009).

Performance indicators based on those in receipt of the Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) (Directgov, 2010) were first published by HEFCE in relation to the WP agenda for students entering in 2000-01 when 1.4% of all undergraduates and 2% of all part-time students were in receipt of DSA. In 2007-08, 4.5% of all undergraduates and 2.4% of all part-time undergraduates were in receipt of DSA. In absolute terms, full-time disabled undergraduate numbers trebled to almost 49,000 over this time period, although part-time numbers decreased by a third to just fewer than 3,500. However, to give some indication of under-representation, 18% (or 10 million) of the working-age population in 2008 were covered by the DSA. In addition, 23% of working-age disabled people have no formal qualifications compared to 9% of non-disabled people (Employers' Forum on Disability, 2010). When examining the indicators for those in receipt of DSA, it should be remembered that those eligible to apply for the allowance are an extremely diverse group with various forms and levels of disability, which require specific and in many cases specialised support services (Riddell et al., 2007; Fuller et al., 2009).

There are some indicators of success in relation to social class and participation. From 1998 to 2008, the proportion of young full-time undergraduate entrants from state schools and from lower socio-economic groups increased, although the participation rate from low participation neighbourhoods fell (HESA, 2009a). However, the social composition of students has only undergone modest changes (HEFCE, 2009a; HESA, 2009a) and despite modest improvements in participation rates, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are still under-represented in higher education (Bekhradnia, 2003; NAO, 2008). In relation to mature undergraduate entrants, while absolute numbers increased, their overall proportion fell from 25 to 21% between 1998 and

2008. A detailed synthesis of the research on social class and higher education is provided by Stevenson and Lang (2010).

**(ii) Changes in the funding of participation: grants, loans and fees**

Since the days of the Robbins Report in 1963 when participation was 6% of school leavers, the system of student funding has undergone substantial change (for a comprehensive overview see Wyness, 2010). The system has moved from one in which undergraduates were offered free tuition and a means-tested maintenance grant to one with over 40% participation in 2010 but with no such universal system of support. A further complication has arisen with political devolution, resulting in a considerable degree of divergence in policy between the constituent parts of the UK.

The impact of historic changes to fees regimes in relation to widening participation and access are contested. For some, there has been no obvious deterrent effect and both HEFCE (2005) and UUK (2009) have suggested that the shift from grants to loans and fees has not significantly affected entrant behaviour. However, research by Callender (2003) and Callender and Jackson (2005) suggested that after controlling for other factors, students from poorer backgrounds were more debt averse than their better off counterparts:

*Debt aversion deterred entry into HE but was also a social class issue. Those most anti-debt are the focus of widening participation policies and include:*

- *those from the lowest social classes;*
- *lone parents;*
- *Muslims, especially Pakistanis; and*
- *black and minority ethnic groups.*

*(Callender, 2003, p. 3)*

More recent publications have sought to investigate the influence of tuition fees and their impact on widening participation (Adnett and Tlupova, 2008; McCaig and Adnett, 2009). McCaig and Adnett (2009, p.18) are critical of the way in which the current system operates and conclude:

*... unsurprisingly in an increasingly market-driven system, institutions use access agreements primarily to promote enrolment to their own programmes rather than to promote system-wide objectives. As a consequence of this marketing focus, previous differences between pre-1992 and post-1992 institutions in relation to widening participation and fair access are perpetuated, leading to both confusion for consumers and an inequitable distribution of*

*bursary and other support mechanisms for the poorest applicants to HE.*

The paper by Adnett and Tlupova (2008) is also critical of the complexities of the funding system in operation in England. They conclude:

*We have found some initial evidence suggesting that the new English student finance system, particularly the expansion of institution-specific bursaries, has significantly increased the complexity of student decision-making and is providing information too late or incentives too small to significantly affect participation decisions. Many students eligible for financial support seem to be either unaware of their eligibility or unwilling to apply for bursaries even after starting their courses. (Adnett and Tlupova, 2008, p. 253)*

Most recently, the Browne Review, Securing a sustainable future for higher education (2010), was “tasked with making recommendations to Government on the future of fees policy and financial support for full and part-time undergraduate and postgraduate students”. The recommendations, which included lifting the cap on tuition fees, were the subject of intense political debate but new funding arrangements were approved by Parliament in December 2010. The majority of English universities are expected to opt for charging a new maximum fee of £9,000. In contrast, the devolved administration in Scotland has decided that Scottish and EU students studying in Scotland will be exempt from fees, while the Welsh Assembly is to protect Welsh students studying at Welsh HEIs from the level of fees to be charged in England and Northern Ireland.

It is clearly too early to say whether and how the new funding regimes – including the removal of the requirement to pay fees upfront – will impact on total participation and/or patterns of participation, including uptake of more flexible types of provision. However, some of the changes in England, for example in relation to support for students wishing to study part-time, may well prove to be beneficial in widening participation by providing better access to funding than previously available.

### **(iii) Diversity and segmentation between HE providers**

It would appear that WP and access agendas are embraced more enthusiastically by some institutions than by others. While recognising that institutions would have their own strategies for widening participation, Woodrow (2000) worried about creating a dual sector – where some institutions would focus on widening access, while others continued to

focus on their traditional research-led missions. Confirming Woodrow's fears, and in spite of the appearance of supportive comments in institutional mission statements, there is evidence that there is a division among institutional types with regard to access and WP (Harris, 2010; NAO, 2008; The Scottish Government, 2009).

*Each institution has individual benchmarks representing the expected participation for each group, given particular characteristics (such as subject of study, age and entry qualifications) of the students it recruits. Post-1992 institutions generally perform at or significantly above their benchmarks while the English Russell Group institutions (16 of the most research intensive institutions) generally perform at or significantly below their benchmarks. (NAO, 2008, p. 7)*

Those from higher social groups have greater than expected participation rates at Russell Group and Post-1992 institutions and their dominance in highly competitive subjects like Medicine and Dentistry continues (Bekhradnia, 2003; Thomas et al., 2005; NAO, 2008; SFC, 2009). This is highly significant for students' opportunities for progression into a range of careers as the final report, *Unleashing Aspiration* (2009), by the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions (PFAP) recognises. However, if this noticeable segmentation within the sector by socio-economic background reflects the impact of differential preparedness for entry to HE, it might also indicate that the provision of more flexibility in relation to entry qualifications and learning pathways through university might encourage greater diversity of intake into selecting institutions.

#### **(iv) University admissions requirements**

The 'gold standard' in university entry qualifications remains the A-level (or Scottish Higher). However, over time a number of routes have been developed to allow those with other qualifications and relevant prior experience to enter higher education. These include routes for those with vocational rather than academic qualifications, which can successfully widen participation to non-traditional students (Hayward et al., 2008b, p. 19). In addition, there are routes that allow direct entry to later years of degree programmes for those with sub-degree qualifications including Higher National Certificates and diplomas and foundation degrees, although again these opportunities tend to be concentrated in Post-1992 institutions.

Other alternative routes that allow entry to higher education include Access courses, which are an alternative Level 3 qualification for adults with no formal qualifications to enable their progress to higher education.

According to the QAA (2009), there were 349 providers in England and Wales offering 1,557 Access courses in 2007-08, with a total of 35,275 learners registered on the courses. An additional feature of Access courses is that they are often targeted at a specific subject area or discipline (e.g. Access to the Social Sciences, or Access to Nursing). Credit Accumulation and Transfer Schemes (CATS) allow the accreditation of prior learning (APL) or prior experiential learning (APEL) to be used to satisfy entry requirements, and programmes of work-based learning (WBL) and work-related learning (WRL) allow those already in employment to gain entry to degree programmes through vocational routes.

While these alternative pathways may not necessarily widen participation in relation to social class and disability, they do have implications for the diversity of the student body in institutions and the successful progression through university of students who may not fit the traditional mould in relation to age, family commitments, history of studying and/or prior family experience of HE. The opportunity to access more flexible approaches to studying for a degree is likely to be of particular significance to these students for the successful completion of their degrees.

#### **(v) Monitoring quality in HE through performance indicators**

The role of performance indicators is seen as crucial in any assessment of the relative success of flexible learning initiatives aimed at widening participation. However, this is not as straightforward as it seems. Attention has been drawn to the problems of incomplete and missing data in the statistical datasets (NAO, 2008) and the difficulties of comparisons over time when variables and fields are changed (Gorard et al., 2007). For some groups the data are very poor, especially in relation to students aged 21 and over. There are also issues in the mechanisms and measures used to record non-continuation. These include the HESA categories used for listing reasons for withdrawal, which tend to obscure the complexity of explanations given by students themselves. In addition students are often reluctant to give full explanations at the time of withdrawal – or have moved out of contact with the institution altogether. An overview of the development and use of performance indicators in the UK and beyond is provided by Cave et al. (1996), and this is updated for the UK context in the work of Draper and Gittoes (2004, p. 472), who carried out a sophisticated statistical modelling analysis and “support the conclusion that real differences in quality on student progression existed among UK universities”.

**(vi) Perceptions of widening participation in the HE sector**

The language of the 'widening participation' agenda as used in a policy context, and its interpretation by institutions themselves, has been seen as problematic by some, particularly in relation to fostering commitment by HEIs to policies and practices most likely to be supportive of those students whom WP policy seeks to successfully engage in HE. Woodrow (2000) traced the development of the term 'widening participation', explored its prevailing usage and suggested some limitations inherent in its use. Woodrow suggested that, while there were some advantages to the adoption of the term 'widening participation', this term does not forefront the need for real institutional change to enable this participation. Woodrow also analysed concepts often associated with the idea of WP. She saw the labelling of people as non-traditional or non-standard as positing a deficit model and having negative connotations in comparison with those labelled as traditional and as such seen as normal; she suggested that the use of the alternative 'under-represented groups' was less pejorative in that it suggested systemic reasons for lack of entry into higher education.

Building on Woodrow's work (2000), two main strands to the widening participation debate can be discerned: one that posits a deficit model of the individual; and the second that sees under-representation as the result of systemic issues that fail to address the needs of under-represented groups. In the first scenario, individuals are blamed for a lack of motivation and ambition. It is also implicit in this view that the individual benefiting from WP strategies will be required both to adapt and to conform to conventional or traditional higher education practices. In the second scenario, systemic issues are identified as causing the under-representation and/or lack of successful progression of certain groups of students through university. This perspective suggests that the HE sector and its institutions are at fault for failing to provide adequate financial, academic and pastoral support and appropriate learning opportunities for 'WP' students. Flexible progression routes into HE and learning strategies post-entry (i.e. through flexibility in mode, site, timing and content/delivery of provision) potentially provide a rich array of possibilities for addressing these systemic issues.

It is perhaps worth noting in this context that not everyone supports the ideals of increased and widened participation (Jones, 2008) and accompanying any calls to widen participation are alternate views that suggest that WP results in a 'dumbing down' or lowering of standards (BBC News, 2004; Randall, 2005; Hodge, 2003). In addition, there has been an economic debate that focuses on the costs of non-completion (House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Employment,

2001; Yorke, 1999) motivated by concerns over students choosing inappropriate (for them) programmes of study and fears, in some quarters, that many of those students taking up wider-participation opportunities in higher education will inevitably drop out (see, for example, Randall, 2005). Irrespective of this particular debate, WP remains a key policy agenda for the sector with dedicated funding to meet the additional costs for HEIs of outreach activity to raise the aspirations of potential students and teaching support to improve their retention and success.

## Focus of the synthesis

It has been suggested that the use of alternative forms of delivery and the creation of flexible pathways through higher education (Outram, 2009), the development of alternative programmes of study, like the introduction of foundation degrees in 2001 (Greenwood and Little, 2008; Hicks *et al.*, 2009), the use of accelerated learning (McCaig, Bowers-Brown and Drew, 2007), and the opportunities made available through innovations in information and communications technology that have allowed the development of distance, blended and e-learning (Laurillard, 2002; Sharpe *et al.*, 2006) have, through the flexibility they offer, opened up new possibilities for widening access to, and facilitating successful participation in, HE.

Historically attention to the notion of flexibility emerged internationally *inter alia* in the context of the use of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and in workplace learning. For at least two decades in the context of ODL, authors have been referring to the notion of learning ‘anywhere and anytime’ (see Wong, 2008, for an overview) and in a self-paced manner (Baldwin-Edwards 2004). Such learning needs are a function of policy imperatives to encourage and accommodate a more diverse constituency with situational demands linked to family, work and social obligations, disability, and geographical remoteness from higher education settings (Kember, 1999). It has also long been recognised that it is the structure of educational offerings that “expresses the rigidity or flexibility of the course’s educational objectives, teaching strategies, and evaluation methods” and “describes the extent to which course components can accommodate or be responsive to each learner’s individual needs” (Moore and Kearsley, 1996, p. 203). It follows that not only does flexibility apply to structure of provision, access routes to those structures and pedagogic experiences therein, but, as noted in *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003), greater flexibility also has a role in meeting the needs of a more diverse student body.

The purpose of this review of research is to provide an overview of the evidence for the contribution of different types of flexible learning to improving access, experience and success for under-represented groups both within and beyond higher education. The report will focus particularly on students from lower socio-economic groups and disabled students.

Given the difficulty of fully defining flexibility and flexible learning, it is perhaps instructive to say what it is not. The traditional undergraduate experience delivered face to face in a university location, generally to school leavers, can perhaps be referred to as rigidity in the system and sector, which flexibility seeks to overcome. If widening participation is to be about encouraging the participation of those people or groups who are currently under-represented, then flexibility is about adapting the functions and structures of higher education systems and institutions to offer more flexible modes of study in order to overcome the limitations placed on students from under-represented groups by the traditional full-time model of study.

Manifestations of flexibility to be covered include:

- flexibility in admissions. We take this to mean entry routes for those with alternative qualifications to those posited in the traditional model;
- flexibility of mode, both of attendance and of delivery, whereby students may study part-time, at a distance utilising technology or as a mix as seen in blended learning;
- flexibility of location, which may be related to the above, or may mean attendance not at a university, but in an FE college, a local community space, at the workplace or at home;
- flexibility of teaching, learning and assessment practices to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body;
- flexibility in duration, with the introduction of foundation degrees, the use of other forms of short-cycle higher education or the option of accelerated learning or decelerated learning;
- flexibility in recruitment where, rather than the focus being on school leavers, a variety of other interventions are utilised. In-reach projects may encourage engagement with pupils at an earlier age in order to raise aspirations of higher education or they may engage at the level of the local community in the case of outreach to adults.

## Related terms and concepts

### Accreditation of prior learning

Formal acknowledgement (based on professional assessment), by way of granting credit, of students' previous learning: credit is given towards a programme of study or towards professional body accreditation (Harvey, 2004-11).

### Accreditation of prior experiential learning

APEL is the formal acknowledgement (based on professional assessment) of learning acquired from previous experience, usually from experience unrelated to an academic context. APEL is similar to APL in as much as it is recognition of prior learning, but is broader as it allows, in theory, for learning from any prior experience. Often APEL and APL are used synonymously and the terms overlap. They are probably most clearly distinguished in the UK context, although, even here, differential usage is not systematic (Harvey, *ibid.*).

### Articulation

In education this refers to linkages of qualifications between sectors, often with guarantees of credit transfer. In the case of the UK, this most readily occurs between further education and higher education, typically from Higher National Certificates and Higher National Diplomas in Scotland or from foundation degrees in the rest of the UK to the second or third year of first degrees. This process of credit transfer is linked in many cases to tariffs as defined in qualification and credit frameworks (in Scotland the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF, see <http://www.scqf.org.uk>), and in the rest of the UK the Qualifications and Credit Framework (see <http://qcf.skillsfundingagency.bis.gov.uk/>)).

This may be facilitated by partnership arrangements of various types, some very close. An example of one such close relationship is University Plymouth Colleges (UPC), a partnership between the University of Plymouth and local colleges to increase access to undergraduate level courses in a scattered rural environment, and a full faculty of the university. The main activity is the provision of two-year foundation degrees at participating feeder colleges, which are both an end in themselves and a progression route to the final year of a full Honours degree at the University of Plymouth. In Cornwall, UPC is one of the main contributions to the Combined Universities of Cornwall (CUC) work via the FE sector, who do not independently provide their own HE level work. Many students study on a part-time basis and most are in work, some co-funded by employers.

**Dual-mode institutions**

Dual-mode institutions offer both face-to-face and distance learning, either discretely or in combination, thereby offering spatial and temporal flexibility. This is a rare phenomenon in the UK, with only small pockets of activity and little that is comprehensive in nature, a notable exception being the University of Highlands and Islands. The lack of such flexibility in the UK contrasts with some other parts of the world, especially countries with greater geographical challenges. For example, in Australia distance learning provision is offered in the main by institutions that operate as dual-mode institutions that provide degree programmes to both on- and off-campus students. An example of a dual-mode institution offering flexible delivery through the use of integrated technology systems is the University of Southern Queensland (USQ). Many dual-mode universities exist in Canada following mergers of traditional and distance universities (Abrioux, 2006; Hope, 2006).

**Dual-sector institutions**

In some countries the boundaries between institutional forms have broken down. Tertiary education in Australia has developed three types or models of institutional arrangement for articulation in tertiary education: single-sector, stand-alone HE and VET institutions with various links and relations between the sectors; 'dual-sector' universities; and 'co-located' institutions. Dual-sector institutions in the Australian context offer both non-advanced TAFE (technical and further education) and advanced HE provision within the same institution. RMIT Melbourne, for example, is a dual-mode institution.

While dual-sector providers have been established in this form to improve articulation arrangements and have comprehensive policies to do so, commentators report that the unified status does not assure transfer, since a range of internal barriers to collaboration between the two arms of these institutions appear to emerge.

A few institutions in the UK combine these sectoral areas in one framework or at least have close relationships; for example, the University of the Highland and Islands arrangement, and the Universities of Bradford and Plymouth among others.

**Mode of study**

This refers to whether a programme is taken on a full- or part-time basis and/or by distance learning. As to whether mode is full- or part-time the Higher Education Statistical Agency,

[\(http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php/component/option,com\\_collns/task,show\\_manuals/Itemid,233/r,03011/f,070/\)](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php/component/option,com_collns/task,show_manuals/Itemid,233/r,03011/f,070/) states:

**Full-time** students are those normally required to attend an institution for periods amounting to at least 24 weeks within the year of programme of study, on thick or thin sandwich courses, and those on a study-related year out of their institution. During that time, students are normally expected to undertake periods of study, tuition or work experience which amount to an average of at least 21 hours per week.

**Part-time** students are those recorded as studying part-time, or studying full-time on courses lasting less than 24 weeks, on block release, or studying during the evenings only.

**Other modes of study** include those students writing-up theses, on sabbatical or on FE continuous delivery, except where these have been tabulated separately.

In practice many students who are formally full-time combine study with work and therefore HE becomes part-time. Therefore the distinction to a degree is an artificial one. However, truly part-time provision that is offered at times other than across the conventional 09:00-18:00 day, that allows well-structured decelerated accumulation of credit and that encompasses the whole curriculum offer is rare.

Provision in distance mode, often exploiting the use of information and communications technology (ICT) platforms, except at The Open University, is also rare and rarer still is blended provision combining campus-based and distance learning. However, as noted elsewhere, the use of online learning to complement face-to-face provision is of increasing relevance.

### **Orientation of study**

In the UK this notion refers to the academic/vocational divide, but it is an international phenomenon.

In most countries higher education provision at undergraduate level can be divided into academic programmes of a largely theoretical nature (defined by UNESCO in ISCED 1997 as level 5 type A) and those with an occupational orientation (ISCED level 5 type B). Generally this distinction parallels institutional differentiation between universities and other types of HE provider (i.e. sector differentiation), and type B qualifications do not provide access to doctoral studies. In the UK this differential once existed between universities and polytechnics, but now exists between universities and FE colleges. A linked concept is the dual-sector institution that crosses the vocational and academic.

In the context of access to HE and flexibility, orientation of study relates to credit transfer from FE to HE, that is from courses with a vocational orientation (HNC/Ds and FDs) to Bachelors provision. That being said many question just how vocational the qualifications in FE are.

More generally there are, of course, many exceptions to this generalised description of structures, and for Europe these are best described in a EURYDICE (2003) publication.

### **Modularity**

Another aspect of flexibility refers to the latitude in accumulating chunks of credit in relation to its size, content (both subject matter and what can be combined) and level. At one extreme a fully modular system would allow credit to be accumulated using modules with different numbers of credit points across different disciplines and without respect to formal level within credit and qualification frameworks. However, as Pratt and Cocking (1999) suggest, there is some controversy about the quality of student learning, and problems of coherence and progression, in modular systems.

### **Qualifications frameworks**

Qualifications frameworks (QFs) are reference points for all awards within a nation's education, training and qualifications based on assigning qualifications to levels usually based on learning outcomes. They cover all types of education, training and qualifications, from school education to academic, professional and vocational provision. QFs may also take into account non-formal and informal learning outside the boundaries of formal educational institutions, thereby extending what counts as valid and accredited learning. They can be used as the benchmark for inter-institutional transfer especially between FE and HE in the UK context. QFs exist in many countries and in Europe the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) provides a trans-national reference point for the national states of the European Union.

The UK and European frameworks can be found at:

- England, Wales and Northern Ireland – <http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/qualification-and-assessment-framework/89-articles/250-explaining-the-national-qualifications-framework>;
- Scotland – <http://www.scqf.org.uk/>;
- Europe – [http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc44\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc44_en.htm).

Other examples include:

- Australia – <http://www.aqf.edu.au/>;
- Germany – <http://www.deutscherqualifikationsrahmen.de>;



- Ireland – <http://www.nqai.ie/>;
- South Africa – <http://www.nqf.org.za/>.

### **Short-cycle higher education**

Short-cycle higher education is ISCED level 5 provision, normally of one or two full-time equivalent years' duration. It is of interest in a number of countries because this form of offer provides a route to expansion that has the potential to be economically viable for both individuals and governments. Moreover, evidence is emerging in some countries that programmes with a shorter duration of study encourage disproportionate participation from those groups who do not traditionally access higher education, thereby combating social exclusion, a policy imperative in many societies. It is also the case that those countries where non-university HE (normally short-cycle) is important relative to university education are ones that provide more years of tertiary education as a whole (OECD, 2001, p. 77). The US is among the leaders in the provision of non-university education as a proportion of the total offer.

Qualifications gained through short-cycle higher education carry a variety of names. Some examples include:

- US – Associate Degree;
- England – foundation degree, Higher National Certificate and Higher National Diploma;
- Scotland – Higher National Certificate and Higher National Diploma.

### **Vocational education and training**

Vocational education and training (VET) refers to provision that relates to the requirements of particular occupational areas, with vocational education normally relating to formal programmes of study that lead to an academic award and vocational training to provision that is short-term and focused on the development of specific skills. However, these distinctions are not absolute and, as in many areas of the educational endeavour, there is much blurring. One aspect of structural flexibility is transfer from VET provision (i.e. FE in a UK context) to HEIs with or without advanced standing for credit already achieved.

This cross-over role of institutions with a vocational mission into higher education is extensive throughout the world, though it occurs in a variety of institutional forms.

In policy terms this raises questions as to the contribution of this level of provision as an end in itself within the mix of higher education offer as a whole within a region and the extent to which this form of provision leads to an interface that allows transfer to degree-level provision within HEIs in

the region. This may or may not occur through formal systems of institutional agreement allowing articulation.

It is instructive when examining flexibility and widening participation to consider international models. Examples of interest include community colleges (CCs) in the US, which offer vocational education at the ‘non-baccalaureate post-secondary level’, primarily focusing on occupationally specific preparation as well as post-secondary level occupational (career) and academic (collegiate) programs. In Australia, technical and further education (TAFE) colleges not only offer initial vocational educational qualifications, but also Diplomas and Higher Diplomas, which within the Australian Qualifications Framework are designated as higher education level provision.

### **Work-based learning**

Work-based learning (WBL) refers to formalised learning that is based wholly or largely in a work setting with the potential of credit being awarded by a validating body. This may be used to gain entry into higher education provision and/or to gain credit towards higher education qualifications. In some cases whole qualifications may be awarded by HEIs based on WBL.

The logic of WBL is that it assists organisations in three ways. Firstly, it increases the skills base of the workforce. Secondly, through the process of learning itself, it enables the organisation to manage and respond to change. Thirdly, it increases the knowledge base of the organisation, which is seen as the key to discovery and innovation. Set against this context, developments in work-based learning are seen as particularly appropriate to increasing the development of workplace skills and knowledge, while at the same time widening access to learning (Loots, Osborne and Seagraves, 1998). A related concept is the accreditation of workplace learning, a variant of APL.

### **Key research reports**

It is perhaps instructive to provide some details of how the research featured in this section and the synthesis overall was selected. As noted, flexible learning can cover a vast range of related and complementary concepts, processes and themes, and therefore it has not been possible to review literature related to all aspects of what might be considered as representing flexible approaches to HE provision. It is also the case that the aim of this report was to synthesise the findings of research that addressed the contribution (both potentially and as proven) of flexible learning to widening participation more specifically. In this context the literature has been found to be limited: a finding in itself. The research

reports reviewed, therefore, provide good examples of some of the key research investigating issues of relevance to the enhancement of access to, and successful progression through, HE for students in a WP context. They include reports looking at flexibility in relation to: institutional and sectoral flexibility; levels of demand for increased provision of flexibility in pace and timing of delivery; flexible entry routes and qualifications; provision for disabled learners; and the impact of technology. In addition, and in order to situate the above literature, research on participation and progression rates for under-represented groups is also reviewed.

On a more general level, one concern was to select the most recent and relevant literature available. In addition, and mindful of the trenchant critique of most research in the area of WP by Gorard *et al.* (2007), we have tried to concentrate where possible on: research that has been subject to rigorous peer review; research that is of relatively large scale; and research funded through a rigorous and robust competitive funding process. Reports are introduced in date order.

### **Enhancing the Quality and Outcomes of Disabled Students' Learning in Higher Education (Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) 2004-2007)**

**Project Director: Mary Fuller**

<http://www.tlrp.org/dspace/retrieve/3585/Fuller+RB+46+FINAL.pdf>

#### **Aims**

This project set out to assess the extent to which, in the light of increasing numbers of disabled students, universities are becoming more inclusive (Fuller, M. *et al.*, 2008). Its aims were:

*... to explore disabled students' experiences of learning and their educational outcomes compared with those of non-disabled students in the context of the Disability Discrimination Act requirement to make reasonable adjustments to teaching, learning and assessment practices. (Ibid., 2008, p. 7)*

#### **Methods/sample**

Multiple methods were used to elicit data and included: a survey of students at the target institutions to allow comparisons between attitudes to learning of both disabled and non-disabled students; four institutional case studies and 31 case studies of individual students; analysis of institutional level aggregated data; and an analysis of degree outcomes.

#### **Findings**

The team found that there were significant differences between the four institutions in the proportion of students who had disclosed a disability

and the proportion from disadvantaged backgrounds. The significance of the Disability Discrimination Act was a major impetus for action at the institutional level, although respondents in all four institutions were concerned about compromising academic standards, particularly in relation to students with dyslexia.

In relation to outcomes, the data from the case studies suggest that dyslexic students do well in comparison with non-disabled students but that those with other unseen disabilities do less well. Most of the adjustments were formulaic – provision of a laptop, lecture notes and extra time in exams. However, students often had to engage in multiple discussions with different lecturers to ensure agreements about reasonable adjustments were understood. Moreover, within institutions, differences existed at the departmental level and some disciplines were more willing than others to make adjustments to their pedagogy to accommodate disabled students.

The research team also noted that it is problematic to treat disabled students as a single category and also to attempt to address issues with a ‘catch-all’ approach. They note that two students with the same disability may have quite different experiences. The team also reported that students with other unseen disabilities such as mental health issues were least satisfied with adjustments and least likely to complete their course of study. Many of the students while happy with adjustments made were unhappy with being labelled as disabled, and the team suggest that there are concerns among the students about discrimination in the labour market if identified or labelled as disabled.

In relation to the perception of lecturers, most were supportive, but some expressed concerns about standards and uncertainty existed about what ‘reasonable adjustments’ meant regarding marking and issues of grammar and punctuation in relation to dyslexic students, for example. They also expressed some concerns about equality and standards with some suggesting it was unfair to make adjustments for students with dyslexia, but not for a student where English was their second or third language.

Finally, the research team also noted that the main beneficiaries of recent disability legislation may be non-disabled students in that many of the adjustments made to support disabled students in the areas of teaching and learning will be of benefit to all students. This is an important point and made elsewhere in the synthesis.

While noting that institutional type seemed to have an impact on policy and practice, the research team suggested that their findings had a

number of implications for all institutions. These included: the development of an inclusive curriculum, which made adjustments and choices available to all; an examination of fitness-to-practice regulations that are an additional barrier to disabled students and a greater awareness among staff as to the extent to which a disability may limit the ability to practice; and greater and more transparent support for disabled students on placement or who wish to study abroad. In addition, the team drew attention to variations among respondents in their levels of social engagement and how this could be better facilitated and they also noted that moments of transition into, through and exiting university were often more problematic for disabled students as they had to make decisions about disclosure at numerous points in time and often with little specific support. Finally, the team called for more detailed analysis of completion rates and outcomes by impairment at the institutional level, which may allow better targeted support for other students with unseen disabilities who may be reluctant to contact disability support services.

***Demand for flexible and innovative types of higher education (SQW, 2006)***

[http://www.sqw.co.uk/file\\_download/24](http://www.sqw.co.uk/file_download/24)

**Aims**

This study was commissioned by HEFCE to investigate the demand for flexible and innovative forms of HE specifically concerned with flexibility in the timing and pace of delivery with a particular focus on “both the delivery of existing programmes/provision and the delivery and design of new programmes” (SQW, 2006, p. 1).

**Method/sample**

Ten institutions were selected including pre- and post-1992 universities and one college of higher education to reflect different institutional missions and different non-traditional delivery methods:

*... most of the HEIs we visited have substantial numbers of non-traditional entrants and, more specifically, they tend to be non-school leavers (and therefore older), local, and with family commitments. (SQW, 2006, p. 10)*

Two models were developed: the accelerated degree and varying pace by choice of number of modules to study. As a result of the consultation these were then market tested with discrete groups in relation to age, prior qualifications, current undergraduates in both vocational and

traditional subjects, those under-21 qualified but not participating, mature students and those who had just completed Year 12 and were considering entry to HE (SQW, 2006, p. 1).

### Findings

Visits to institutions suggested that the main form of flexibility offered was in respect to the number of modules that could be studied per semester (sometimes known as intensity or load). Consultation with institutions suggests a major driver was:

*... student demand, and because in many cases it forms a necessary component of institutional strategies aimed at meeting the widening participation aspect of their missions. The principal way in which students exploit the inherent flexibility of a modularised system is through extending the period of study. (Ibid., p. 2)*

In relation to accelerated degrees, they noted that only the private University of Buckingham offered this in its 'pure' form through Honours degrees completed in two years. They note that there is some provision of accelerated degrees elsewhere, but often only for certain subject areas. However, they suggest, and provide details to support their conjecture, that the present funding system militates against publicly funded institutions following this model.

The main barriers to flexibility reported in the findings were: higher institutional costs for IT and student support; a perception that the current teaching funding model does not adequately compensate for the higher cost; issues with staff engagement in the process; and, given the limited finances available to them, low levels of student demand.

They present results from focus groups comprising both participants and non-participants in HE in relation to: attitudes towards HE; awareness of opportunities; financial considerations; the two-year degree; and varying pace by choice of load or intensity of study. They conclude that at the present time and under present funding models (at the time of the research) it is unlikely that the demand for flexibly paced learning will increase significantly.

*This general picture is consistent with the information we gathered during consultations with HEIs although, for some, PT provision was relatively more important to first degree provision than the aggregate figures suggest. Part-time, and the potential to switch between PT and FT study, is also an important component of WP strategies and activities and some universities would have little*

*prospect of meeting their objectives unless they offered such flexibility. (Ibid., p. 41)*

***Widening participation in higher education: A quantitative analysis (TLRP, 2006-2007)***

**Project Director: Anna Vignoles**

<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/my-esrc/grants/RES-139-25-0234/outputs/Read/ea0aa6c5-fbc3-40d0-b18b-bba9549f6102>

Although at first glance this research study has little immediate relevance to the role of flexibility in widening participation, it is suggested that it is important to include this research as without rigorous and robust analysis of participation data it is impossible to evaluate the impact of the raft of Government initiatives and strategies designed to attract those from disadvantaged groups into HE.

**Aims**

A major focus of this project was a quantitative analysis of the educational pathways of pupils from state schools. It sought to identify who goes on to higher education, the type of higher education they experience and the outcomes in relation to labour market opportunities. A central aim of the project was to understand the importance of prior achievement in school in explaining under-representation in higher education.

**Methods/sample**

The research team utilised new large-scale data on higher education participants and non-participants with information about their schooling. This links data from the former departments for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), which allowed them to follow every Year 11 state school pupil in England in 2001-02.

This data allowed the team to determine whether the obvious disparities in participation, particularly in social class, noted in performance indicators, are mainly attributable to decisions made at age 18, or whether earlier educational achievement plays a more significant role than previously considered. The dataset allowed the whole age cohort to be tracked and allowed the team to examine educational trajectories of those from poorer social backgrounds and ethnic minority backgrounds

and identify when and if their educational achievement at school begins to fall away.

### Findings

While recognising the gap in participation between those from low and high socio-economic backgrounds, they suggest that once prior achievement in school, particularly between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 5 (between ages 11 and 18), is controlled for, pupils with the same levels of achievement at school are more or less equally likely to participate in higher education:

*Broadly, the reason why poorer students do not access high education to the same extent as their more advantaged counterparts is not because of choices being made at age 18, but because disadvantaged students do so poorly in secondary school. (Vignoles et al., 2008a, p. 2)*

One of the reasons put forward is that poorer children tend to attend lower-achieving secondary schools. The main thrust of this argument is also supported by Gorard and Smith (2007), who also identify early-life determinants of participation and suggest that the present policy focus on those aged 16 to 18 has only marginal effects on widening participation and that policy levers should be directed elsewhere<sup>1</sup>.

In relation to the type of HE that poorer students experience, Vignoles et al. (2008a, 2008b) note that they are more likely to attend lower-status institutions and they draw attention to the differentials in economic returns to those who attend more prestigious institutions (Hussain, McNally, and Telhaj, 2009; Greenwood, Jenkins and Vignoles, 2007; Chevalier, 2006). However, once again, when they allow for the prior achievement of state school pupils, poor and rich appear to attend similar quality higher education institutions. They do though provide a caveat:

*... our analysis of state school students suggests that interventions to raise achievement in secondary school are likely to be needed to ensure that poorer students access the research-intensive universities and go on to earn more in the labour market as a result. (Vignoles et al., 2008a, p. 3)*

In the case of ethnic minority entrants, as with their initial decisions to participate, prior achievement has an influence on the type of institution

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1 Further support for early determinants in recent research includes Ermisch (2008), who focused on parenting and early childhood development on inequality and social immobility.

and after allowing for prior achievement, all ethnic minority groups have a similar or higher probability of attending a high-status institution. They also found that there were differences in subject choices by group. Ethnic minority and students from deprived backgrounds were more likely to enrol on courses with perceived high economic value than White British and less deprived counterparts, perhaps suggesting a more instrumental orientation to higher education.

***Non-participation in HE: Decision-making as an embedded social practice (TLRP, 2006-2007)***

**Project Director: Alison Fuller**

<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/my-esrc/grants/RES-139-25-0232/read/reports>

While the research reported below is about non-participation rather than participation, it is suggested that it is important to include an analysis of why those with relevant and appropriate qualifications to enter higher education choose not to participate and how – given their demographic – their needs might be better accommodated so as to encourage the entry of more individuals from under-represented groups to HE.

**Aims**

This project takes a quite different approach to widening participation in that it seeks to identify the decision-making processes of those who decide not to participate in higher education (Fuller *et al.*, 2008). The researchers note that little previous research exists on adults who choose not to participate in higher education and suggest that if the recommendations of the Leitch Review of Skills (HM Treasury (2006) (40% of adults aged 19-64 should be qualified to Level 4 by 2020) are to be achieved, then it is important to understand why those with appropriate entry qualifications choose not to participate in HE.

**Methods/sample**

The project involved two interlinked phases. Phase one involved desk research and interviews with key informants representing a range of relevant national, regional and local organisations. Phase 2 consisted of interviews with a number of non-participating individuals and members of their immediate networks of intimacy. Utilising a social capital approach the authors suggest that educational decision making is rooted in social networks:

*The lens of social capital sheds light on the strength of interpersonal ties; the extent to which networks can be seen as close or more loosely knit, and as providing openings on to other*

*networks. Contrasting forms and patterns of social capital appear to increase or decrease the potential for HE participation within our networks, particularly in relation to our potentially recruitable entry points. A network approach to educational decision-making avoids the danger of privileging and reifying individualised accounts, which can often be generated as an artefact of research designs which focus on individuals in isolation. (Fuller et al., 2008, p. 21)*

## Findings

The research team identified a number of individuals who might be considered as potentially recruitable to HE as their research sample. These were individuals with at least a Level 3 qualification that would allow entry to higher education, many of whom could be considered as 'lifelong learners', having obtained their qualifications later in their lives. In the main these were vocational qualifications or occupational awards that they linked with career advancement rather than solely with issues of personal development or educational progression. In particular they noted that strong evidence existed for gender and class norms of domesticity being in operation and having a powerful influence on the participation decisions of females.

In relation to sources of advice and guidance about education and employment decisions, members of the sample primarily relied on their informal networks, reinforcing the research team's belief in decision making as an embedded and collective social process. The team found no instances of universities directly reaching out to the participants in their research.

As noted Fuller *et al.* (ibid.) suggest that the potential pool of suitable adults is of increasing relevance in the context of the Leitch Report. However, in many cases their respondents remained to be convinced of the relevance of higher education to them. It was not readily apparent, therefore, that this group would respond. If it is to happen, however, the researchers suggest that a curriculum that is responsive to the needs of these potential learners – which includes flexible delivery, credit accumulation and content valued by employers – will be required.

A further complication was also noted by Fuller *et al.* (2008), who observed a generational influence operating through respondents' networks in relation to the perceived benefits of participation in higher education. They noted that in many networks younger members were the first to participate in higher education. However, many older network members expressed concern about the poor returns from participation

and the difficulties their younger relatives had experienced in attempting to achieve graduate-level employment:

*Contrastingly, we found that network members who had experienced HE as mature learners exerted a generally positive influence on the attitudes of other members by opening up possibilities for alternative educational, career or lifestyle trajectories. (Fuller et al., 2008, p. 22)*

Finally, Fuller *et al.* (ibid.) note that despite the relative ambivalence towards higher education and its relevance to them, the sample had extensive experience of informal and formal learning as adults and generally had a positive attitude towards it. There was also a very high incidence across the sample of self-directed and non-certificated learning in pursuit of personal interests.

In conclusion, they note that, despite the expectations in the literature, debates among non-participants do not focus on barriers but, as already mentioned, on relevance, and that opportunities in the workplace have a powerful influence on decisions made about participation in HE. They call for more collaboration between employers and HEIs to develop high quality work-related learning if they are to encourage those currently not participating to change their minds.

### ***Universal Access and Dual Regimes of Further and Higher Education (TLRP, 2006-2008)***

**Project Director: Gareth Parry**

<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/my-esrc/grants/RES-139-25-0234/outputs/Read/ea0aa6c5-fbc3-40d0-b18b-bba9549f6102>

#### **Aims**

The focus of this project is on flexibility of provision in institutions (colleges and universities) that deliver both further and higher education. Parry uses the terms 'dual-sector' or 'mixed-economy providers' for those located in one sector, but have elements of their provision delivered through another sector. Drawing on existing theories and models of differentiation in post-compulsory education, it examines the impact of *sector* at three levels: on policy formation; on organisational development; and on student progression. A key concept was that of duality and the team wished to discover how, if at all, this duality manifested and was experienced at each of these three levels. Parry notes the level of dual-sector provision in England:

*At present, around 270 colleges in the learning and skills sector teach courses of higher education, mainly in small amounts. In the higher education sector, 40 establishments provide programmes of further education. (Parry et al., 2008a, p. 2)*

### **Methods/sample**

In relation to policy formation and aspects of organisational development, interviews were carried out with policy officials who had knowledge of relevant policy developments impacting on the development of dual-sector provision. In order to understand the nature and extent of participation in dual-sector education and its role in expansion and equity in higher education, the team assembled a combined dataset. One drew on individual level data:

*Using data for the most recent years available, our aim was to describe the movement of students completing one or more learning aims at the level normally required for entry to undergraduate education (Level 3) and then beginning a higher education qualification in the following year or the year after. (Parry et al., 2008b, p. 22)*

Another drew on institution level data:

*Under a collaborative agreement with HEFCE, we not only obtained data from HESA but were provided with a file created by HEFCE of Unique Student Identifiers. This enabled us to track individuals completing (or due to complete) a Level 3 learning aim in further education colleges and higher education institutions in 2003/04 and beginning a higher education course in either of these types of institution in 2004/05 and 2005/06. (Parry et al., 2008b, pp. 22-23)*

The combined dataset allowed the team to investigate eight possible pathways or routes between further and higher education. In addition, in order to investigate organisational development a number of case studies were recruited. The first four were partners in the project and reflected a range of differing trajectories and configurations taken by dual-sector institutions and these were subject to detailed fieldwork. A further six were selected and recruited after an analysis of a HEFCE review of FE in HE and represented a range of provision across the sector. In addition, an Australian case study was also selected to provide a comparative element.

## Findings

An examination of the case studies allowed four models of dual-sector organisation to be identified: merger; change of sector; strategic alliances; and organisational separation. However, Parry *et al.* (2008b, p. 27) note that widening participation and student progression were rarely the driver for dual-sector status:

*At the corporate level, market-related considerations are often the most powerful drivers, with institutions searching for competitive edge and survival in a complex market. In these circumstances, equity and skills agendas are not easily aligned.*

In relation to policy development, Parry *et al.* drew attention to a number of tensions between the further and higher education sectors. These include a suggestion that despite separate funding regimes, there is little discernible rationale for a two-sector system, which has resulted in ambivalence about their combination in a common system. This may be compared to the development of policy in Scotland as noted by Gallacher (2009). In addition, they note that despite Government calls for cross-sector provision and progression, funding and regulatory regimes have moved further apart.

As noted in the research synthesis section to follow, the majority of HE students in FE are employed adults studying part-time with over half of those completing foundation degrees progressing either internally or externally to a Bachelors degree (Yorke and Longden, 2008). Specifically in relation to the focus of this review, Parry *et al.* (2008a, pp. 9-10) note the importance of the flexibility offered by dual-sector institutions in relation to widening participation, yet also provide a caveat in relation to existing tensions:

*... the location of higher education in further education colleges has contributed to a democratisation of access and a diversion of demand away from high-cost and high-status parts of the system. On the one hand, general further education colleges make a distinctive contribution to widening participation by qualifying a larger proportion of students from low participation neighbourhoods and less affluent areas. On the other, the interfaces between further and higher education are configured in ways that do not necessarily secure smooth or seamless internal progression.*

***Degrees of success: The transition between VET and HE (TLRP, 2006-2008)***

**Project Director: Geoff Hayward**

<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/my-esrc/grants/RES-139-25-0238/outputs/Read/9e4f66db-0a0d-4c62-a2b7-82c7148385d9>

**Aims**

The aim of this project was to investigate the ways in which people with vocational qualifications make the transition to higher education (Hayward *et al.*, 2008b). Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

- *What proportion of those applying with vocational qualifications goes on to HE?*
- *How successful are they? How does this compare to other groups of students with other types of qualifications?*
- *What is their experience of HE when they get there?*
- *How could the transition between vocational education and training (VET) and HE be made smoother and easier to manage for students and lecturers? (Hayward *et al.*, 2008a, p. 7)*

**Methods/sample**

The project consisted of three interlinked parts. In part one, large-scale datasets were analysed to map the transitions between vocational education and training (VET) and higher education and to understand the factors that influence the probability of transition to, and success in, HE. Part two compared and contrasted the transitional journeys of those with VET qualifications and those with more traditional entry qualifications and their respective experiences of the learning environments provided by higher education institutions. Part three involved engaging in dialogue with practitioners in order to discuss the findings of the first two parts and make them relevant to practice.

**Findings**

Hayward *et al.* (2008b) report on the findings of part one and note that despite the recent Government focus on improving transitions between VET and HE, little is known about rates of transfer. Hayward *et al.* make use of a linked dataset achieved in co-operation with other TLRP projects, which allowed a finer grained analysis that enables different pathways to be discerned. They report on an increase in those entering HE with vocational qualifications from 18% in 1995 to 25% in 2004, but they add a caveat to these headline figures:

*However, this growth was due to an increase in those combining vocational and general academic qualifications, up from 4% to 14% over this time period, while the proportion with vocational qualifications only decreased from 14% to 10%. (Hayward et al., 2008b, p. 19)*

Overall, they suggest that entrants with vocational qualifications do represent widening participation in relation to lower socio-economic groups and are more often male, older, from an ethnic background and more likely to be disabled than students entering via the traditional academic route. In relation to progression, they note that those with VET qualifications are less likely to obtain a place and more likely to drop out during their first year. However, they note that the picture is considerably improved for those with a combination of vocational and academic qualifications who are only slightly less likely to complete than those with only traditional academic qualifications. As noted elsewhere, they confirm an over-representation in less prestigious institutions and question whether this access can be considered as fair. In relation to subject choices, they note that VET entrants are more likely to be represented in applied subjects like Engineering, computing and creative arts and design, and less likely to be represented in the humanities and Philosophy. Moreover, they state:

*The students with VET backgrounds seem primarily to be found in the fields where there are perceived skills shortages. If this is the case, such students could contribute not only to a widening participation agenda, motivated primarily by a concern with social justice, but also to the connected policy aim of producing a more competitive workforce, motivated by economic concerns. (Hayward et al., 2008a, p. 2)*

In relation to their experiences in higher education, Hayward *et al.* note that first-year students from a VET background encountered a number of issues with transition. Difficulties included: a lack of preparation in the VET setting for what would be expected of them in higher education; the demands of specific study areas including academic writing; and managing the work/life/study balance. Hayward *et al.* also interviewed staff to get their perspectives on VET entrants. They note that while knowledgeable about their subjects, some academic staff had only limited information about vocational qualifications in their area:

*Most of the lecturers and admission staff interviewed expressed a strong interest in the question of how students with a VET background fare in and upon entering HE. Admission staff (who*

*are not necessarily lecturers) had a more or less clear picture of the kind of qualifications with which students apply. In most institutions there seems to be some formalised mechanisms for judging the quality of applicants applying with vocational backgrounds/qualifications. However, these mechanisms are often not very transparent and a member of staff in many cases individually interviews applicants with a vocational background. This indicates a difference in the role of qualifications as boundary objects (Star, 1989) in the transition of different groups of students into HE. (Hayward et al., 2008b, p. 22)*

Finally, and as a result of their user forums, the research team note a number of implications of their project findings. These include the observation that flexible entry through the use of vocational qualifications has not yet resulted in evenly distributed access to higher education. They also suggest that additional mechanisms are needed to achieve changes in individual and institutional behaviours, finding that combinations of vocational and academic qualifications significantly increase the probability of a successful transition and proposing that information and guidance to this effect should be developed. Based on their findings they further suggest that students' educational backgrounds should be taken into consideration in the design of teaching and learning in higher education and that lecturers' ability to respond to those from diverse educational backgrounds in a meaningful way should be strengthened. In much the same way, student support services should also be aware of entrants' backgrounds and develop and adapt services as necessary so as to provide appropriate support and guidance to all.

***Patterns and trends in part-time adult education participation in relation to UK nation, class, place of participation, gender, age and disability, 1998-2003 (Macleod and Lambe, 2007)***

This paper draws on aspects of the TLRP Learning Lives project, utilising elements of the same dataset. Macleod and Lambe (2007) examine variation in the take-up of part-time learning opportunities over a six-year period.

**Aims**

A main concern of the paper is to understand how individuals from various social and demographic groups interact with education and training over time. A further concern was the flexibility of space (not just in a geographical sense, but as the place in which the education and training occurs, whether it be home-based, work-based or institution-

based) and who the provider was. This allowed a five-fold classification of *place of learning*.

### Methods/sample

In addition to the normal or traditional demographic variables (such as gender, class, age and occupational status) the authors wished to include a subjective measure of disability based on a social model of disability rather than just a measure using the more objective medical model (Hughes and Patterson, 1997; Thomas, 1999).

### Findings

Macleod and Lambe (2007) note that constituent parts of the UK between 1998 and 2003 exhibited differences in general levels of participation with more English adults (20-23%) participating than Welsh (18-21%) or Scottish adults (15-18%). The figures showed similar levels of differential participation along gender and class lines<sup>2</sup>. In relation to class Macleod and Lambe (2007, p. 404) note that “participation ratios for individuals in non-manual occupations, compared with those in manual occupations, are, without exception, higher across all four nations and across time”. Over the period in time examined, manual rates of participation were between 8 and 12% lower than rates for non-manual adults. Utilising a broader definition of class, Macleod and Lambe note that while relative differences between classes were broadly similar across the constituent nations, for each occupational level England had higher participation than Wales, which in turn had higher participation than Scotland. Participation rates were lowest in Northern Ireland.

In relation to *places of learning*, participants were asked to choose one of five categories: employer-based; (education) institution-based; home-based; private-centre based; and job-centre/club-based. Over 40% of provision was identified as employer-based, with institution-based provision relatively stable over time at around 30%. Figures for participation in home-based and private-based learning were both around 15%. Females were more likely than males to be accessing institution-based learning in their own time.

Macleod and Lambe also examined participation by disabled learners and note that those classified as disabled are around 10% less likely to participate in part-time education or training than their able-bodied counterparts; while those with a health problem that prohibits them doing certain types of work are around 8% less likely to participate compared to

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2 Data for Northern Ireland was not always directly comparable, but where it was it appeared similar to Scotland.

non-disabled individuals and these figures appear relatively stable over time.

In summing up, Macleod and Lambe (2007) note that relatively little appears to have changed over time, although there have been increases in the numbers of entrants in receipt of Disabled Students' Allowance. However, they are unsure whether and to what extent this increase represents increased participation by disabled students in part-time education or training, or is simply a manifestation of better reporting and/or an audit culture that is target-driven.

### ***Learning from Disability Projects in Higher Education*** (Davies, 2008)

This review focuses specifically on issues of practice in relation to disabled students and reports on institutional responses to issues of inclusion. Davies draws on a number of previous projects funded in 2002 under initiatives aimed at improving the learning opportunities of disabled students. There were two strands:

*Strand one – to improve provision in small and specialist institutions that currently had little provision for, or experience in supporting, disabled students.*

*Strand two – to develop and disseminate resources relating to the learning and teaching of disabled students in priority areas.*  
(Davies, 2008, p. 4)

#### **Aims**

The Strand 1 programme aimed to improve student choice by increasing the number of institutions providing at least base-level provision for disabled students. The National Disability Team (NDT) identified five key elements of such baseline provision. There should be: policies and procedures on admissions and assessments for disabled students; nominated staff to ensure appropriate provision for disabled students; staff development programmes at all levels of the institution; an estates strategy that addresses the needs of all disabled students; and procedures to monitor the effectiveness of provision for disabled students. Davies notes, however, that many of the Strand 1 projects went beyond simple baseline provision and institutions often went further and set wider goals.

### Methods/sample

In total, 32 projects in small and specialist institutions across England were funded under

Strand 1. In Strand 2 there were 23 projects, which produced a range of resources and tools for subject communities, academic staff and disability practitioners designed to promote more inclusive approaches to teaching, learning and assessment. The outcomes of the Strand 2 projects are reported in *Embedding success: enhancing the learning experience for disabled students* (Dickinson, 2006).

### Findings

Davies (2008) specifically notes that she is not providing an evaluation of the projects, but rather her purpose is to provide an overview of project outcomes in the following areas:

- *Small and specialist institutions;*
- *Developing inclusive policies and procedures;*
- *Providing access to information;*
- *Raising awareness and understanding;*
- *Establishing and improving services for disabled students;*
- *Inclusive learning, teaching, and assessment.*

Throughout the report, examples from the projects are provided as illustrative of good practice. For example, in relation to the development of inclusive policies and procedures, a number of important strategies are noted including: a policy statement on the admission of disabled students in the admissions policy; the development of policies to ensure that disabled students are able to demonstrate their potential; and, the development or revision of policies and procedures on confidentiality, disclosure and information sharing (Davies, 2008, p. 8).

In relation to the provision of information to potential applicants, a number of suggestions for good practice are provided regarding marketing materials and prospectuses and the provision of information to new students (Davies, 2008, p. 12). The importance of raising staff awareness at all levels of the institution and across the wider student body is highlighted in order to secure long-term cultural change. Davies reported that a number of the institutions had been able to embed staff provision for supporting disabled students once the project funding had ceased, to include in some cases taking on additional dedicated members of staff. Key developments included the provision of screening and diagnostic services for specific learning difficulties and the provision of assistive technologies.

In addition, Davies (2008) reports on developments to make all aspects of student learning more inclusive, stressing the need to build inclusion into the process from the beginning, i.e. at the stage of programme validation and review. Staff were provided with information and guidance on the barriers to learning faced by disabled students and offered suggestions as to how to make their teaching practice more inclusive; this included adjustments to assessment strategies and tools to make them more inclusive and accessible to disabled students, and the provision of learning materials in alternative formats so that students can access content in the format best suited to their needs.

Finally, in her conclusion, Davies draws attention to a number of strategies that have been put in place to keep issues of inclusion at the heart of institutional decision making:

*The projects have raised the profile and influence of designated staff for disabled students within their institutions. In the past, where they existed, designated disabilities staff were often isolated and had little influence or access to decision-makers. In many institutions this is no longer the case and disability professionals are seen as an important source of expert advice and guidance for the whole institution. (Davies, 2008, p. 35)*

### ***Flexible Delivery: An overview of the work of the Enhancement Theme 2004-06 (Mayes, 2006)***

This report provides an overview of the QAA Enhancement Theme on Flexible Delivery directed by the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC, see [http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/SHEEC/default.asp#\\_blank](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/SHEEC/default.asp#_blank)). A number of specific areas were reviewed and two are cited in the synthesis section of this report (Knox and Wyper, 2008; Miller *et al.*, 2008).

#### **Aims**

The main objectives of the enhancement theme were:

*... to address the challenges inherent in a mass HE system, to meet the emerging demand from students for a more learner-centred approach, and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the Scottish HE sector in taking forward the learner-centred agenda. By providing a vision of, and tools for, a learning environment that addresses the diverse needs of different types of*

*learners, the Committee aims to transform the way HEIs in Scotland consider flexible delivery. (Mayes, 2006, p. 2)*

### **Methods/sample**

In order to further define the theme, two scoping studies were conducted. The first was aimed at obtaining institutional views, while the second was concerned with the views of students. This was followed by a sector-wide consultation to map the development of various aspects of flexible delivery at the institutional level, while student opinions on the types of flexibility they would like to see was also obtained. In addition, a global scan was undertaken and six case studies conducted in the US, Canada, Australia, Finland and England, in order to investigate the international context and current practice in relation to flexible delivery issues. This resulted in a number of themes emerging for further investigation: the continuum of flexibility; learner autonomy; exploring effective learning environments; cross-institutional and cross-sector development; staff development; and resources (Mayes, 2006, pp. 5-8).

### **Findings**

The overview examines current and planned developments in flexible delivery in Scottish HEIs and reports on the state of play in a number of areas:

- flexible entry, examining pre-entry guidance, online admissions and registrations, integrated administrative systems, induction and summer schools;
- flexible programmes, including flexible modes of study, e-learning and personalisation;
- academic support and guidance, considering integrated, proactive student support services, personal development planning (PDP) and peer support;
- assessment, looking at the use of alternative assessment methods and e-assessment.

In addition, it also reported on current practice and progress in careers guidance, flexible learning spaces and collaborative teaching across and within institutions.

As a result of the investigations and scoping studies, it was decided to commission six development projects<sup>3</sup>:

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<sup>3</sup> While there is no room here to review these reports, with the exception of Knox and Wyper (2008) and Miller et al. (2008), readers are directed to QAA Enhancement Themes website for further details:

<http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/FlexibleDelivery/publications.asp>.

- *supporting the development of the flexible curriculum: flexible entry and flexible programmes;*
- *a model for analysis and implementation of flexible programme delivery;*
- *Scottish HE developers' learning objects and distributed services;*
- *accessing JISC and Higher Education Academy resources to support flexible delivery;*
- *the use of VLEs for HE in Scotland;*
- *a personal vision for flexible learning from a systems perspective. (Mayes, 2006, p. 18)*

Finally, Mayes (ibid., p. 28) provides some comments and recommendations for the future development of flexible delivery initiatives. He notes that due to the nature of the SCQF, Scotland has a “uniquely responsive framework” in which to develop and promote flexibility. He suggests that one clear recommendation is support for the mainstreaming of flexible entry and flexible programmes within HEIs. However, this will require staff development and training and explicit resources at both national and institutional levels and the recognition of diverse approaches to achieving and demonstrating learning within programme design.

### ***Progression from vocational and applied learning to higher education in England (Carter, 2009)***

A report prepared for the then Minister of State for Education, the Rt Hon David Lammy MP, by the University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC).

#### **Aims**

This report sets out to review learner progression from vocational and applied learning to higher education and to make recommendations. It notes that the rationale for supporting vocational progression is well known and can be defined in relation to: skills needs, as noted by the Leitch Review; employability, with greater rates of employability at Level 4 compared to Level 3; and social mobility. With vocational learners more likely to come from lower socio-economic groups, increasing their participation could, according to Carter (2009, p. 4), significantly widen participation at a time when traditional, middle-class entry is a stubbornly dominant feature of HE.

### Methods/samples

The research underpinning the report comprised of three strands. The first strand involved extensive desk research and a review of existing literature and policy relating to vocational learning. A call for written contributions from the sector resulted in a number of submissions from universities, colleges, employer bodies and other interested stakeholders. The final strand involved discussions with relevant national bodies, organisations and students.

### Findings

The report put forward 24 recommendations and there is not room here to examine all of these. Rather, we have chosen to concentrate on two issues of particular interest to the focus of this review: namely, flexible entry qualifications and widening participation.

In reviewing the literature, it noted a number of important contributions to the vocational progression debate (Skills Commission, 2009; PFAP, 2009; UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2009) and in concluding noted the publication of two important papers by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS): Higher ambitions: The future of universities in a knowledge economy and Skills for growth – The national skills strategy. Carter states that in both these White Papers, flexibility in vocational progression is pivotal to policies on widening participation, fair access and skills development.

Carter (2009, p. 10) notes some important differences between *vocational* learning designed to equip people with the knowledge, skills and competence required to work effectively in a particular sector and learning *applied* or *contextualised* to an industry sector. She also mentions the range of qualifications and the number of possible routes the potential applicant (and admissions officer) must navigate.

Carter (*ibid.*, p. 15) also observes that the learners in the report tended to fall into two groups: those, mostly young people, who tended to be completing primarily Level 3 qualifications in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), and for whom progression and learning choices are made by the individual; and individuals in work who had completed Level 3 qualifications but whose learning was largely driven by the needs of employment and might be supported by the employer.

Regarding numbers, Carter notes the increase in those taking vocational qualifications, predominantly National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ), yet contrasts their progression rates to higher education with those taking A-levels.

Carter also mentions that when those with vocational or applied qualifications do enter higher education, they tend to be concentrated in less prestigious institutions and in particular subject areas. However, she does recognise that many research-intensive institutions do not offer the range of work-based or vocational courses of interest to these learners. She makes two specific recommendations in relation to the above points (ibid., p. 19):

*Recommendation 3 - Government should champion and support, through targeted funding, those institutions (including FE colleges with significant HE programmes) that can demonstrate a commitment to recruiting vocational learners and that have, or are developing, expertise in the provision of learning programmes, recruitment processes and related support that meets the needs of level 3 vocational learners and their employers.*

*Recommendation 4 - Government should commission a study to evaluate how developing vocational progression opportunities can enhance social mobility and in particular increase the number of men from lower socio-economic groups progressing to higher education.*

One reason identified by Carter for low rates of progression is a lack of demand from both employers and learners. This has also been noted by other studies reviewed above (SQW, 2006; Fuller, M., et al., 2008). Carter suggests that more research is needed into career pathways and their impact on promotion and career progression if others are to be convinced of the benefits of HE.

Finally, the project looked at the need for flexibility in programme design, delivery and learning support for those entering with vocational qualifications and again, after providing some context, Carter makes a number of recommendations. She notes that different types of pedagogy may need to be adopted to respond to the needs of vocational learners and that universities need to recognise that vocational learners may have issues in the transition between quite different learning environments:

*Recommendation 14 - HEIs should be encouraged to review existing knowledge and perceptions about non-traditional qualifications and review the content of appropriate degree courses and their suitability for level 3 vocational learners.*

*Recommendation 15 - Government should commission research to establish how HE programmes, particularly the first year of*

*undergraduate programmes can respond to the needs of diploma students, those with vocational qualifications and apprenticeships.*

Carter also recognises that students from a vocational or applied background often have quite different issues relating to the work/life/study balance to those faced by traditional students, and as such their support needs may be quite different. She recommends (Recommendation 16) therefore that HEFCE provide extra funding to allow institutions to provide more flexible support systems to cater for a more diverse student population.

Finally, Carter's penultimate recommendation (Recommendation 23) is concerned with the lack of robust systems for measuring and evaluating vocational progression and states current systems are inadequate. She notes in particular the lack of data on part-time progression and the fact that professional qualifications and continuing professional development are largely outside the scope of national data collections.

In the light of the change in government in 2010, it is yet to be seen if any of the previous administration's plans and/or Carter's recommendations for higher education will be taken forward.

***Diverse provision in higher education: options and challenges.***  
**Report to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS).**  
**HEFCE (2011)**

<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/flexible/statement.htm>

**Aims**

This report was produced by HEFCE on behalf of BIS before the Browne Review and at the request of the former Labour government for advice. It sought to assess trends in demand for a wider variety of provision – meaning 'undergraduate provision that differs from the standard of an honours degree completed in three years through full-time study'. It also examined how such diverse provision might be encouraged. The report was commissioned in December 2009 and submitted in July 2010 in the context of three specific government priorities, one of which was: widening participation and 'promoting and providing the opportunity of successful participation in higher education to everyone who can benefit from it'. The underlying theme was 'providing for diversity' and the request for such initial advice was re-stated following the change in government in May 2010.

**Methods/sample**

The authors drew on HESA data, relevant internal and external sector reports, HEFCE surveys of non-regulated fees and extensive 'conversations with institutions and other organisations'. Whilst looking at a wide range of types of provision, they looked at three forms of provision in detail all of which they considered might have the potential for growth: foundation degrees, accelerated degrees and part-time provision.

**Findings**

These are organised in three sections looking at: the higher education landscape and barriers/drivers for uptake of alternative forms of study; the potential for growth in provision of the three forms of provision examined in detail as measured against BIS-identified priorities of WP, employers' needs and value for money; and how HEFCE might encourage a shift away from a traditional model of provision towards other forms of studying.

The report concludes that the HE landscape is already diverse. However, whilst some forms of flexible provision do contribute to WP, there is little incentive for HEIs to embrace greater diversification while demand for traditional programmes exceeds supply. Such demand is in part a function of cultural factors ie students' – especially young students' – own expectations of the university experience which would need to change or be mediated by changes in funding regimes for patterns of demand to change. Proposed changes in the funding of part-time provision - ie its equalisation with full-time programme provision – may begin to effect such change. Conversely, the role of funding, additional to core, in driving strong demand for foundation degrees to date has been recognised and its withdrawal leads the authors to conclude that such growth will not be sustained. Accelerated degrees, which appeal particularly to mature students, are seen to have some potential for growth, however, albeit from a low base currently.

In relation to the contribution to WP, the report found indications that foundation degrees have both widened access to HE and achieved employment outcomes which compare well with those for full-time first degree students. Significantly, nearly 60% of students studying full-time for a foundation degree continue in HE to obtain an honours degree. The evidence for the contribution of accelerated degrees to WP is more complex, however, given their appeal to older entrants to HE and the positive correlation more broadly between mature entry to university and entry from lower participation neighbourhoods and without A-levels. Likewise, and given the differing levels of intensity of study covered by the term 'part-time', examination of the contribution of part-time provision

to widening access is similarly complex given the fact that part-time students are also more likely to be mature. The effects are therefore not clear. However, the authors see the current funding regime as providing the main barrier to the growth in part-time provision which is heavily concentrated in teaching-intensive HEIs.

## Synthesis of research findings

Much of the literature on flexibility in the context of widening participation concentrates on students' *access* to, and alternative pathways into, higher education. However, the issue of student *retention* is often raised when issues of access and widening participation are debated, if only because, as commentators have noted, if institutions recruit students from under-represented groups then they have an obligation to provide adequate means of support for such students (Boylan, 2004). Thus the synthesis considers access to and experience within HE of students from diverse backgrounds. However, the experiences of *progression* of students from underrepresented groups into future roles after they leave higher education is also important to any discussions of equity of experience and is considered in this synthesis where relevant findings are available.

This synthesis is organised around a number of specific aspects of flexible learning drawn from the core definition above. However, it is recognised that the boundaries between them can be blurred. With this in mind, but in order to consider the evidence for the contribution of flexible learning to the access, retention and progression of students from under-represented groups, the synthesis is structured into sections as follows:

- Prior qualifications accepted: vocational qualifications, credit accumulation and transfer, accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL);
- Mode of delivery: distance, blended and e-learning;
- Site of delivery: FE college, community centres, the workplace and at home;
- Teaching, learning and assessment practices: curriculum design, the use of alternative media, variation in assessment regimes, student involvement and personalised learning;
- Timing of delivery: evenings and weekends, short-cycle, accelerated degrees and part-time study.

### **Prior qualifications accepted**

This is widespread policy interest in who gains access to what in HE. The Schwartz Review *Fair Admissions to Higher Education* (Schwartz, 2004), considered fair access issues and contributed to the setting up of programmes to improve the equity of the admissions system (see also UUK, 2008, and The Sutton Trust, 2009). Later, the *New Opportunities* White Paper (HM Government 2009) announced the establishment of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions (PFAP). This was charged with “making a professional career genuinely open to as wide a pool of talent as possible” (PFAP, 2009, p. 5). The panel made 80 recommendations and concluded:

*Access to a professional career has become more and more inflexible over time. Graduate only entry has become a mindset across the professions, with profound implications for social mobility. The professions will not flourish unless they extend, rather than limiting, the rungs on the professional career ladder. Some are already doing this; others need to follow their lead. Our proposals are aimed at helping them to do so. By widening the funnel through which the professions recruit, our proposals will help to reverse growing social exclusivity. In the process, we believe that they will help to lay the foundations for a second great wave of social mobility in our country. (Ibid., p. 58)*

Flexibility in prior qualifications accepted refers to entry routes for those with alternative qualifications to those posited in the traditional model. Recent initiatives in the UK designed to facilitate those with non-traditional entry qualifications in applying for higher education have been the focus of a number of recent reports (Connor, Sinclair and Banerji, 2006; Sinclair and Connor, 2008). In relation to non-traditional entry qualifications, Connor *et al.* (2006) report that those with Level 3 vocational qualifications are unevenly distributed across the higher education sector and, although they make up around 18% of all entrants, their presence, dependent upon institutional type, varies from around a few percentage points in Russell Group institutions to just under a third in some FE/HE colleges. There were also subject differences with higher representation in Maths, computing, business/admin studies and Creative arts and design than in others, notably the humanities and unsurprisingly given the fierce competition for places – Medicine and Dentistry. Connor *et al.* suggest that a lack of information and awareness of vocational qualifications and their relevance to HE study by some university staff, especially in the admissions process, was a major factor underlying the uneven distribution of students with such entry qualifications and that there was little evidence of overt discrimination, although they did find

some “widespread, deep-seated attitudes which give lower value to vocational than traditional academic (i.e. GCE A-level) qualifications” (ibid., p. 4).

Further support for differing patterns of participation is also reported by Carter (2009) in a report to the then Minister of State for Higher Education, David Lammy MP, and while reported in more detail in the major research section, it is worth reiterating some points about participation and progression to HE. Two of their recommendations are worth revisiting and are of importance here when we consider the role of flexibility in widening participation to HE. However, given the economic situation it is uncertain how far this agenda will continue to be taken forward:

*Government should champion and support, through targeted funding, those institutions (including FE colleges with significant HE programmes) that can demonstrate a commitment to recruiting vocational learners and that have, or are developing, expertise in the provision of learning programmes, recruitment processes and related support that meet the needs of level 3 vocational learners and their employers.*

*Government should commission a study to evaluate how developing vocational progression opportunities can enhance social mobility and in particular increase the number of men from lower socio-economic groups progressing to higher education.*

In addition to identifying barriers, Connor *et al.* (2006) also noted examples of good practice which included: raising awareness and knowledge about the relevance of vocational qualifications through staff development and training programmes; outreach programmes that encouraged those with vocational qualifications to apply to university; and, the development of teaching and learning methods aimed at maximising the potential of all irrespective of background and entry qualifications. Finally while noting that this was a small-scale study, they made a number of important recommendations for stakeholders, which included: the development of more positive attitudes among HE staff; the improvement of knowledge about vocational qualifications within HEIs; the improvement in both UCAS and HESA data provision on entry qualifications and vocational equivalence on the tariff scale; an exchange of views and practices on delivering courses where young people are recruited with different types of qualifications; and more research focused at earlier educational stages and on how learners on vocational pathways make decisions about entry to HE.

Two years later, Sinclair and Connor (2008) revisited the question of vocational entry qualifications and reported what had changed in the intervening period. They note that in general, the numbers of those with Level 3 qualifications is growing, although this varies by type of qualification. In relation to policy, the main change they report is in relation to the creation of Lifelong Learning Networks (LLN) (HEFCE, 2007), which were set up with the express intention of improving vocational progression pathways to higher education through partnerships at the local level between universities and colleges; according to Sinclair and Connor their impact is already being felt in relation to guidance and advice. In addition, they note that since the introduction of the new diploma system was only in 2008, it is too early to say what the impact of this will be. In relation to the UCAS tariff, they noted that BTEC qualifications are now more firmly embedded in the tariff system.

Overall, they report that in the case study institutions there has been considerable progress since the first report and they hope through the involvement of LLNs to be able to disseminate examples of good practice in the provision of advice and guidance and through training and the raising of awareness through staff development. However, they recognise that much is still to be done and the development and implementation of good practice varied by institution. Finally they report on some continuing barriers which include: disparity in the treatment of those with A-levels and those with vocational qualifications; courses that require an A-level in addition to the Level 3 vocational qualification; and the ambiguity in some marketing materials in describing the acceptance of vocational qualifications. In closing they note that in general barriers are greatest for selecting courses and institutions. This latter issue is likely to have a negative impact on the progression of students into certain career paths as noted earlier.

Hayward *et al.* (2008b), reviewed earlier, suggest that there is little parity of esteem between vocational and academic qualifications and a limited awareness and knowledge on the part of HE staff of the relevance of vocational qualifications. HEPI (2007), however, found that the issue of parity of esteem is complex and when actual ability and prior attainment are taken into account then differences in participation are not as great as they initially appear. In addition, HEPI (2008) examined differences in academic experiences and outcomes between those with academic and vocational entry qualifications. They found that a major reason for the greater number of those with vocational Level 3 qualifications studying part-time was related to the lower tariff scores in general they received:

*Although the raw figures suggest that vocational level 3 students are three times more likely to study part time than students with academic A levels, when allowance is made for their very different tariff scores these differences evaporate: they are in fact reversed. (HEPI, 2008, p. 2)*

HEPI use a weighted approach to the data, in which they attempt to make the GCE A-level population more like the VCE A-level population:

*It attempts to isolate differences in experience which are due solely to the nature of a student's level 3 qualifications, and are not to do with the student's general ability or with the subject studied. (HEPI, 2008, p. 2)*

Using the weighted dataset they report that: VCE A-level entrants to university are 50% more likely than those with GCE A-levels to stay at home and five times less likely to go to a Russell Group university. In addition, they are more likely to change from full-time degree to part-time or sub-degree studies and 25% more likely to drop out than a GCE A-level student in a similar subject and with an equivalent Level 3 tariff (HEPI, 2008, pp. 5-6).

Thus, while greater acceptance of vocational qualifications may be making some contribution to access to certain programmes and institutions, there is more to be done regarding *retention* and to support *progression* to the full range of career opportunities available when students can gain access to the full range of institutions and programmes.

Flexibility in prior qualifications is also offered through courses delivered as extra-mural activities of universities, which are often organised within Departments of Continuing Education (Osborne, 2006). Originally unaccredited, these normally short-cycle courses have increasingly become credit rated, but historically there was often no compulsion for students to gain credit and the courses were about the specific interests of students. These short courses are open access and give those with an academic interest in a subject the opportunity to experience some aspects of higher education. Details of the profiles of these students are not readily available; however, they often provide opportunities for older students. Even so, there is little evidence that participants use the credit gained in these short-cycle courses to gain access into an undergraduate degree (Osborne and Thomas, 2003, pp. 6-7).

A trawl of the websites of a representative sample of universities that traditionally have offered provision in the extra-mural model, and interviews with members of the Universities Association for Lifelong

Learning (UALL) conducted during the course of this review, has clearly indicated the decline in this type of offer. As long ago as 2003, Osborne and Thomas spoke of there being a few notable exceptions to the decline in Departments of Continuing Education. In intervening years, most of these exceptions have disappeared, the final funding challenge being Equivalent Level Qualifications (ELQs) (see Duke, 2008). HEFCE (2008) announced that it would 'no longer provide funding to higher education institutions (HEIs) and further education colleges (FECs) to teach students who are studying for a qualification that is equivalent to, or lower than, a qualification which they have already achieved'. High proportions of those taking university courses in the extra-mural mode fall into this category, and without funding support from HEFCE for many universities the offer is not viable.

Osborne (2006) noted the use of special entrance examinations, which allow individuals a second chance to show their potential, but suggested that although in operation in the French and Spanish higher education systems they are not a feature of UK higher education. He does, however, report some recent developments in this area in the UK around the use of psychometric tests rather than traditional examinations, noting that:

*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 takes forward the Tomlinson proposals' for curriculum reform. (Osborne, 2006, p. 8)*

Osborne (2006) also considers Credit Accumulation and Transfer Schemes (CATS). In theory this was meant to allow transfer and portability of credit. Credit could be accumulated horizontally at a given level (not necessarily in one location or through one institution) and also vertically through levels. In order to achieve an award, the student had to accumulate the relevant amount of academic credit at each necessary level. The standard amount of academic credit normally required is 120 credits per level:

*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. (Osborne, 2006, p. 9)*

However, Osborne notes that although attempts have been made, CATS has rarely fulfilled the promise of flexibility that was envisaged at its introduction. The picture in Scotland with its Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework (SCQF) has perhaps gone further than that in England, but Osborne notes some, perhaps unintended, consequences of the way that credit accumulation and transfer operates 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. (Osborne, 2006, p. 10)*

One recent and radical call to overhaul credit transfer and the distinction between part- and full-time education, which would do much to address barriers to the implementation of more flexible forms of higher education, was made by King (2008, p. 7). She envisaged a system that offers:

*The elimination of the increasingly indefensible division between part-time study and full-time study in terms of regulatory, funding and student support frameworks.*

*An alternative model to the traditional academic calendar to allow year round enrolment and access to facilities so that learners are not confined to artificially imposed times of the year or even times of the day.*

*A system of transferable credit based learning and credit based funding which recognises achievement irrespective of mode, type and place of study.*

*The ability for students to enter and re-enter HE and gain credit for the study they have undertaken will reward personal commitment and aid retention.*

*A research, practice-based curriculum with increasing flexibility in delivery using a variety of types of engagement - mobile communications, web-based, blended, face-to-face, on campus, in the workplace, in HE centres and FE colleges.*

*A flexible HE workforce that can support diverse patterns of student engagement and enhance staff scholarship, research and practice-based learning.*

*A uniform system of financial support for all students regardless of mode.*

CATS is normally predicated on the existence of the provision of higher education in a further education institution (HE in FE), although such provision is also an end in itself. Such offers have been the focus of a number of recent publications as noted earlier (Golding Lloyd and Griffiths, 2008; Griffiths and Golding Lloyd, 2009; Scott, 2009, p. 417).

The final form of flexibility that has the potential to contribute to access for under-represented groups is the recognition and accreditation of prior (experiential) learning (R/AP(E)L). However, as Osborne (2006, p. 11) notes: "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."

APEL has been described by Wilcox and Brown (2009, p. 2) as:

*... a process that enables people of all ages, backgrounds and attitudes to receive formal recognition for skills and knowledge they*

*already possess. A person's learning and experience can be formally recognised and taken into account to:*

- *gain entry to further or higher education courses*
- *give exemption from certain parts of a new course of study*
- *qualify for an award in an appropriate subject in further or higher education.*

It takes into account both of the following:

*APL: organised prior-learning where the learning has been assessed and where certificates are awarded on completion*

*APEL: learning gained through unstructured experiences and short courses, arising through leisure pursuits, family experiences and work. (Ibid.)*

There have been moves to try and reinvigorate the use of APEL. Garnett, Portwood and Costley (2004) provide a historical overview in the UK , compare this with international comparators and report on a number of case studies. However, they do provide some support for Osborne's pessimism, while noting the possible potential of APEL in the UK as:

- *a flexible response to recognise the learning achievement and future aspirations of the individual claimant*
- *open to all and thus able to contribute to widening participation*
- *supportive of students, often leading to enhanced confidence*
- *rigorous as part of a transparent assessment process*
- *robust as many different forms of learning can be considered in the same system*
- *embedded into the normal processes of assessment and quality assurance*
- *an important tool in the development of the intellectual capital of organisations (especially employers and Universities). (Ibid., p. 13)*

However, they suggest that it has failed to achieve this potential because:

- *information about the possibility of APEL is not always widely available or clearly written*
- *the APEL process can be overly bureaucratic and resource intensive*
- *APEL is perceived as difficult and overly time consuming by students*

- *APEL lacks credibility with some staff and students*
- *APEL can be circumscribed by close matching against prescribed learning outcomes and competency statements which do not fully cover the range of learning achievement held by the individual or valued by their employer. (Ibid.)*

Regarding international comparisons, they note that while APEL is marginal in the UK, it is high on the agenda of the EU, particularly in France, which they suggest has one of the more advanced systems of APEL and accreditation.

The use of an electronic system to enable accreditation was the subject of a study funded by JISC (Malone, 2009). In part, the purpose was to address some of the concerns raised by Osborne and Garnett *et al.* and make the process of accreditation less cumbersome and more user-friendly:

*The e-APEL project brought together four project partners from differing sectors, to create and develop a set of tools to automate aspects of the APEL process, and therefore enhance the service offered to potential work based learning students. (Malone, 2009, p. 4)*

The project attempted to address two major issues identified as problematic in relation to APEL:

- *The manual system for APEL could not easily be scaled up to meet the increase in demand.*
- *Much of the work required by APEL needs to be undertaken before the potential student makes a commitment to study and pays any fees. (Ibid., p. 5)*

### **Mode of delivery**

For the purposes of this synthesis, flexibility in mode of delivery refers to variations from the traditional face-to-face model, such as blended and distance learning. Oliver and Trigwell (2005) note that the most common interpretation of blended learning is the integration of traditional teaching and learning practices with online learning opportunities. Distance learning is now commonly taken forward through online learning but could also encompass, for example, course materials being sent out by post and teaching over the telephone. However, the influence and adoption of new technologies to provide flexibility in the delivery of materials, resources and support means that these are also now becoming the dominant form or medium of teaching in a distance learning context.

With the importance of technology, and indeed specific software products, increasing, Shurville, O'Grady and Mayall (2008) set out to examine three pieces of educational software to discover if they did truly allow educational and institutional flexibility. Given its widespread adoption in the UK, particularly by The Open University, it is encouraging that MOODLE, an open source virtual learning environment (VLE) and one of the software applications examined, received praise for its existing toolsets and for its adaptability by developers (Open University, 2005; Graf and List, 2005; Luckin *et al.*, 2006). One of their concerns, however, was that poorly designed and inflexible software has the possibility of engendering resistance rather than enabling the adoption of flexible approaches both at an individual and at an institutional level. Indeed, Mahdizadeh, Biemans and Mulder (2008, p. 142) suggest that:

*... teachers' use of e-learning environments can be explained to a high extent by their perceptions of the added value of these environments, which in turn are substantially influenced by their opinions about web-based activities and computer-assisted learning.*

Other authors have raised more general concerns about the shift to technology-based approaches to flexibility and possible risks. For example Jones *et al.* (2010) question the concept of *digital natives*, and dispute calls that a new generation, marked in some distinct way by their interactions with technology, are arriving at university. A similar point is made by Bennett, Maton and Kervin (2008, pp. 778-779) who note that while there are students who are highly adept with technology:

*... there also appears to be a significant proportion of young people who do not have the levels of access or technology skills predicted by proponents of the digital native idea. Such generalisations about a whole generation of young people thereby focus attention on technically adept students. With this comes the danger that those less interested and less able will be neglected, and that the potential impact of socio-economic and cultural factors will be overlooked.*

In addition, Holley and Oliver (2010) question some of the assumptions underlying the implementation of technological approaches to blended learning, particularly where non-traditional students are concerned. One aspect they engage with is that of learner confidence, which according to Greener (2008), was an important aspect of blended learning. They report on aspects of a study part of which looked at new students' engagement with a module designed using interactive multimedia

resources to scaffold their early experiences of coming to university. The other part looked at the experiences of students coming to the end of their studies. Of importance were the limits to the extent to which, and the confidence with which, students were able to exert control over their own learning and their own previous life experiences:

*Students bring their own life experiences to academic study, and arguably those better prepared by work and previous positive educational advantage will more easily 'match' the learning needs of a module offering some elements of blended learning. The converse is also the case: those poorly equipped in terms of previous life skills and educational experiences are most likely to experience a mismatch with the course. (Holley and Oliver, 2010, p. 698)*

They further note the irony that while online materials had been developed to support widening participation, it was often the traditional 'good' student who benefited most.

Despite the cautious note sounded in some of the above, it is important to remember that other studies have shown clear benefits from the introduction of blended learning (Hughes, 2007). In relation to the student experience, Sharpe *et al.* (2006) reported that the flexibility of access to materials offered online was important to students who experienced difficulties accessing face-to-face provision through disability, family or work commitments:

*For some people who suffer from disabilities and have no choice but to take time out, it is an enormous benefit in order to keep up with what is happening in lectures and what areas to read up on. Brilliant!!! (Anonymous student cited in Sharpe et al., 2006, p. 60)*

In addition to being positive about the flexibility of access that virtual learning environments allow, disabled students also liked the anonymity using the VLE allowed:

*Nobody online had to know that I had a disability, whereas in a classroom environment it stands out like a sore thumb. (Anonymous student cited in Sharpe et al., 2006, p. 72)*

The benefits for those with disabilities are also reported by Gulc (2006), who states that not only does blended learning allow for distance and flexible learning, it also enables disabled students to use a range of assistive technologies to access resources that may otherwise have presented them with considerable difficulties.

Ferrell *et al.* (2007) report on the findings of a project into the benefits of implementing e-learning in higher education. The CAMEL Tangible Benefits of e-Learning Project sought to collate and disseminate the real benefits to staff, learners and institutions of e-learning. The research involved 37 case studies spread across 16 institutions. Tangible benefits reported in the case studies include effects on learning, exams results and resources:

*The most fundamental point to come out of all of the case studies is that the appropriate use of technology is leading to significant improvements in learning and teaching across the sector and that this is translating into improved satisfaction, retention and achievement. E-Learning is facilitating the expansion of the sector without necessitating corresponding increases in the footprint of the physical estate and it is allowing broadly the same numbers of staff to educate a larger and more diverse student body. The kind of high quality, diverse, accessible, expanding higher education system desired by government and funders is no longer possible without e-learning. Continued investment and innovation in the field of e-learning is essential if the UK is to remain a world leader in education. (Ferrell *et al.*, 2007, p. 5)*

Chen, Lambert and Guidry (2010) are also supportive of the overall benefits that web-based learning technologies can bring. While they note that the literature tends to agree on an increase in student engagement, they suggest that findings relating to learning outcomes are mixed, yet there does tend to be agreement that the use of online instructional material leads to increased information literacy. However, they also echo the concerns noted above of Bennett *et al.* (2008) that the use of technology may put certain groups of students at a disadvantage.

In the results of their large-scale study, Chen *et al.* (2010) state that ethnic minorities and part-time students among both first-year and final-year students were more likely to enrol in online courses. In addition, final-year students taking professional programmes (Nursing, Teaching, Occupational Therapy etc.) were more likely to enrol in online programmes (*ibid.*, p. 1227). They also note the specific benefits, particularly in relation to information literacy, of blended learning when compared to online or face-to-face delivery:

*... students who took hybrid courses more frequently utilize Web-based library resources in completing assignments than students who took only online or face-to-face courses. (Ibid., p. 1229)*

In relation to learning at a distance, it is important to consider the role of the Open University (OU) in the provision of open access, flexible learning delivered at a distance and through a variety of media. Indeed, it could be argued that the OU is the epitome of flexibility in post-compulsory education with an 'open' admissions policy and no entry requirements for almost all its undergraduate provision. The OU currently has over 175,000 undergraduate students, of whom around 10,000 have disabilities, taught through supported open learning<sup>4</sup> and consistently scores highly for student satisfaction (HEFCE, 2009b).

The majority of its students are part-time, around 70% are in full-time employment and around a third of undergraduates are sponsored by their employers. It is also attracting increasing numbers of younger students, with the median age of new undergraduates being 32. Indeed, a report by UUK (2006) found that the age profile for part-time females studying with the OU was lower than for the sector as a whole. Reflecting its role in widening participation, around 15,000 students a year are studying Access courses. As with traditional undergraduates, females outnumber men (60/40) at an undergraduate level in the OU, while in relation to WP, it performs slightly above its benchmarks for those with no previous HE experience and from low-participation neighbourhoods ([HESA, 2009a](#)).

It is perhaps worth saying something about the scale of distance learning. In a recent UUK report on part-time higher education, it was noted that: "distance learning constituted almost a half of study for first degrees, a quarter of the study at other undergraduate level, and a little less than one-fifth of all study at taught postgraduate level" (UUK, 2006, p. 71) However, it was also noted that the OU taught around 75% of all distance learning students in the UK and 95% at first degree level. In light of the relatively small numbers of distance learning students who study outside the OU, this represents relatively modest use of this form of flexible learning. There may, however, be considerable flexibility afforded by ICT *within* modules. The effect of such flexibility in delivery on widening participation groups is a question for further research especially given the findings of Bennett *et al.* (2008) that the use of ICT may be problematic for some.

### Site of delivery

Flexibility in site of delivery in the context of this synthesis means giving students the opportunity to study not at a university, but at any site of formal education such as a FE college, a local community space or in the workplace (distance learning, which was discussed above, might also be

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://www8.open.ac.uk/about/main/the-ou-explained/teaching-and-learning-the-ou>.

seen as flexibility in site of delivery, in that students may choose to learn at home). Flexibility in site of delivery may be particularly valuable for students from under-represented groups allowing them to better fit their studies around their existing commitments at a time and place of their choosing and also allowing them to progress their studies at their own pace.

Parry *et al.* (2008b) in their investigation of possible pathways or routes between further and higher education, reported that at all levels of their analysis of dual-sector or mixed-economy providers, dual-sector provision has contributed to more equitable access and a move away from high cost and status parts of the system making a distinctive contribution to widening participation – while noting that the interfaces between college and university are complex and “do not necessarily lead to smooth or seamless internal progression”. The provision of higher education in further education settings has been the focus of a number of recent publications. For example, Golding Lloyd and Griffiths (2008, p. 23), writing on support mechanisms for those studying HE programmes in an FE college and the impact on progression, state that:

*Effectively two-thirds of the students interviewed went on to further study, with the remaining third embarking on enhanced employment. Assessing this enhanced employment can present difficulties; many care posts have titles that are not overtly descriptive and do not indicate the level of responsibility or salary. However, all students interviewed at this point indicated progression up the career ladder. In many instances, they had felt that although they were experienced, the lack of formal recognised qualifications had been a barrier to progression.*

In addition, Griffiths and Golding Lloyd (2009) report on the specific and potentially challenging issues involved for both students and staff in introducing and delivering Honours-level study in an FE college:

*Evidence suggests that students feel ill prepared for the final year honours degree work in addition to the transfer to a new course in a different institution. Greenbank (ibid.) suggests that the way to overcome these difficulties and to ensure that the cultural differences between FEIs and HEIs, which can also act as a barrier, be removed is for FDs and honours degrees to be offered in the same institution.*

*This is the model described in this study. The delivery of honours degrees in FEIs is a relatively new concept, particularly in the geographical area of the FEI used in the context of this study.*

*Policy issues such as staffing, mode of delivery within the context of an FE contract, site of delivery and resources have all to be negotiated and developed as a coherent policy. This has been achieved in part although issues such as defined contracts for staff who deliver only HE and allocation of time for out-of-hours working still need to be included in the final policy document.*

However, Scott (2009, p. 417) suggests “that further education-based higher education provision has a key role to play in resolving the tensions, and even contradictions, that persist in England’s still-unfinished mass higher education system”.

In a review of the situation in Scotland, Gallacher (2009) notes the distinctive nature of HE in FE in Scotland and attributes it to the specific policy framework and national structures in operation. He notes that the HNC/D still has currency in Scotland, while in England it has largely been overtaken by the provision of foundation degrees<sup>5</sup>. Gallacher concludes, however, by reinforcing Osborne and Maclaurin’s (2006) points about the lower likelihood of these students progressing from FE (with or without advanced standing) to more prestigious courses and institutions and the fact that although policies are in place to address the issue progress to date has been partial and uneven.

In contrast to these traditional sites of delivery, there have been some recent reports into both work-based learning (WBL) and work-related learning and the need to increase this type of provision in order to meet the demand for skills anticipated in the Leitch Review<sup>6</sup>. At this stage it is perhaps useful to delineate the different forms of work-based learning. Nixon *et al.* (2006) note that a wide range of terms are often used interchangeably: ‘work-based learning’, ‘work-related learning’, ‘vocational learning’, etc.

Rose *et al.* (2001) differentiate work-based learning where the assumption is that the individual is unable to participate in a programme of study at a university due to the nature of their work. They note that this form of work-based learning relies on highly motivated and committed individuals who agree a course of study through consultation between the institution, the student and the employer. In addition, there is an assumption of mutual benefit for the individual and the employer, i.e. one gets a qualification, the other benefits from the alignment of learning outcomes with the strategic priorities of the employing organisation.

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<sup>5</sup> For a comparison of the role of HNC/Ds in Scotland and foundation degrees in England, see the work of Reeve, Gallacher and Ingram (2007).

<sup>6</sup> For a critique of the notion that work-based and college-based learning are incompatible see Hodkinson (2005)

Workplace learning, by comparison, tends to be based around the off-campus teaching of a cohort of students outside of the university setting, often now the subject of negotiation between the employer and the university on the customisation of an established HE programme. Rose *et al.* (2001, p. 71) note that the specifics of workplace learning mean that significant existing knowledge within the workforce can, through independent learning, be used to relate practice to academic learning. Further, students' exposure to a relevant working environment is considered beneficial to comprehension, while lecturing staff can use the workplace to generate recognisable examples, relevant case studies and coursework while still following the syllabus of the existing module. This combination of factors may underlie the findings of Rose *et al.* (2001) in their small-scale study that employed students outperformed their counterparts studying full-time, even though those on workplace learning programmes undertake the same module load as full-time students on campus.

A number of challenges can be identified in relation to workplace. Rose *et al.* (*ibid.*) suggest that in a difficult economic climate employers may be more willing to offer a programme of workplace learning, than to release their employees to study in a programme of work-based learning delivered on campus. It can be problematic ensuring that programmes are viable and it can also tie a worker to a specific job and specific company. While the company may be unable to supply all the equipment required, this may be overcome with arrangements for workers to visit university labs to gain specific knowledge and experience. In relation to opportunities, these may involve additionality or clustering. Additionality might occur for example where a degree programme is in operation, the addition of an HNC/HND programme for lower-qualified workers may result in them transferring into later years of the original workplace degree programme. Clustering may result when a number of SMEs in a similar sector may collectively supply a viable cohort. Finally, Rose *et al.* note the benefits for employers, workers and universities from the provision of workplace learning and its role in widening participation, given that many of those involved in such programmes tend to match a number of WP criteria. However, they note that while they may not be easy to implement they suggest that as a solution to dwindling numbers on full-time Engineering courses it may be crucial if the industry is to survive.

The HEA has undertaken a study of the provision of work-based learning and has released three reports<sup>7</sup> on: guidance for institutions thinking about developing work-based learning through collaborative approaches

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7 See [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/news/detail/2009/wbl\\_reports](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/news/detail/2009/wbl_reports).

with employers; the costs of work-based learning; and the impact of work-based learning on employers and employees. They also commissioned a scoping study by Connor and MacFarlane (2007), which sought to identify key sources in the literature, different approaches and strategies to work-based learning currently in operation in higher education, and finally elements of good practice in methods and approaches to promote develop and sustain work-based learning in higher education. One of the key concerns they raised was engagement with employers, especially those in SMEs, and from their review some suggestions were made about ways to engage more successfully with groups of employers. Connor and MacFarlane (2007, p. 5) also note the potential for work-based learning to widen participation through “attracting more non-traditional students to HE, especially those from vocational or work-based routes who want to take study which integrates work with learning”.

The potential for WBL to widen participation is also noted in a study of foundation degrees by Braham and Pickering (2007), who note that the concept of work-based learning is, according to the QAA (2010), an integral component in the development and design of foundation degrees. Braham and Pickering (2007, p. 49) also point to a number of other benefits to students taking a work-based programme of study:

*Students engage much earlier with research and do so confidently, both in terms of their reading, and workplace based research. Their overall achievements are higher; even when they progress to a traditional BA, they frequently outperform their peer group, something not generally anticipated by the academic community. They also seek to address much more significant problems in the workplace, with a high degree of success in finding real solutions to long term problems, which contributes to a virtuous cycle by further building their confidence, and hence increasing the complexity of their next assignment.*

There are also examples of collaboration in outreach activity that are targeted either at colleges or at local communities, which seek flexible approaches to widen participation among under-represented groups (e.g. Scull and Cuthill, 2010; Saunders, Payne and Davies, 2007). Gowa (2008) sought to analyse the effectiveness of collaborative approaches to widening participation in further education and training utilising a mixed-methods approach to data collection. The author uses multiple case studies, which include both colleges and community education organisations in two boroughs: “All the case-study institutions had widening participation as part of their mission statements. Both location boroughs also had large numbers of ethnic minority and unemployed

residents.” Moreover, “the proportions of ethnic minority learners at all the institutions were far greater than the relative proportion of these groups in the populations of the boroughs in which they are located” (Gowa, 2008, p. 88).

Gowa (2008) found that the main collaborative approach in operation was the use of strategic alliances although the degree of co-operation varied. In general, according to interview and questionnaire data, the partnerships were successful at encouraging members of disadvantaged communities onto courses in further education or training. This was subsequently confirmed by statistical analysis of relevant data, which showed that: “institutions employing collaborative practices are effective at enabling members of ethnic minority communities to access further education and training” (Gowa, 2008, p. 92).

### **Teaching, learning and assessment practices**

This section of the synthesis looks at the role of flexibility in teaching, learning and assessment practice in meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse student body. Such flexibility can range from very simple strategies – such as providing text alternatives to visual images – to much more systematic consideration of flexibility in curriculum design and delivery and assessment. Flexible teaching, learning and assessment practices are particularly relevant to student retention, although perceptions of teaching practice as being inflexible might impact on access should students rule out applying to university on these grounds. The quality of the teaching-learning environment clearly impacts on students’ successful progression through and beyond university into the workplace.

A recent review, *Inclusive Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* (Hockings, 2010), gives a valuable overview of how appropriate teaching and assessment practices can enhance the learning experience for students from under-represented groups. While this broad review does not focus specifically on the impact of flexible practices on access, participation and progression for under-represented groups, it does draw out some themes that are relevant for the present synthesis. The author notes the importance of giving consideration to the principles of universal design when developing or reviewing programmes of study. Universal design implies that curricula and teaching practices are developed from the outset to have in-built flexibility, which allows students to customise the experience to suit their needs, rather than having to request specific adjustments. In universal design, the teaching and assessment practices are planned in advance – with student involvement – to be flexible and inclusive without additional adjustments.

Hockings (2010) also draws attention to studies that highlight the incorrect assumptions academic staff may make about their students' needs in a mass system and notes the importance of staff developing a rich understanding of their students as learners in order to inform decisions about teaching and assessment practices. She suggests that basic forms of flexibility, such as giving students extra time in examinations, are common, but it is much rarer to see either extensive or imaginative forms of flexible teaching and assessment practice. The overall picture, therefore, is one of students having to adapt to their universities, rather than the other way round. Reviewing the impact of e-learning, the author notes that while online learning can provide flexibility that enhances access for some under-represented groups, poor online learning experiences can contribute to isolation and drop-out. Against this broad picture Hockings draws attention to a range of examples of good practice and notes that flexibility has improved more markedly in certain areas, such as in providing alternatives to fieldwork activities previously inaccessible for disabled students.

Gorard *et al.* (2007) and Hockings *et al.* (2008) draw attention to the importance of flexibility in curriculum design such that curricula are not experienced as irrelevant or excluding by students from under-represented groups. Hockings *et al.* (*ibid.*) give a number of examples where aspects of curricula may be experienced as excluding, such as teaching probability using the national lottery as an exemplar when gambling is discouraged or forbidden in some students' religions. Gorard *et al.* (2007) reviewed a number of studies that suggested curricula that did not connect with the interests and experiences of 'non-traditional' students could reduce recruitment from these groups and contribute to drop-out. A number of the studies reviewed by Gorard *et al.* (*ibid.*) also emphasised the importance of involving students in curriculum design and drawing on the students' own experiences within the curriculum. However, Hockings *et al.* (2008) note, that some students may feel too marginalised to offer their own experiences and perspectives on how the curriculum might be made more meaningful for them. It is also important to take into account that Gorard *et al.* (2007) draw attention to many problems with the research conducted into barriers to widening participation, which limit the strength of the conclusions that may be drawn.

Fuller *et al.* (2008, p.3) provide insights into the impact of flexible learning practices on the experiences and success of disabled students in higher education.

*For the most part, disabled students have similar experiences of learning and assessment to non-disabled students. However, disability-related barriers have had a significant impact on their experiences of learning and assessment in a minority of situations.*

*They also note that the main beneficiaries of recent disability legislation may be non-disabled students in that many of the adjustments made to support disabled students in the areas of teaching and learning will be of benefit to all students. This is an important point and made elsewhere in the literature:*

*One unintended consequence of this (disability) legislation is that as departments and institutions introduce more flexible learning and alternative ways of assessment for disabled students, demand is likely to rise for giving greater flexibility for all students. Disability legislation may prove to be a Trojan horse and in a decade, the learning experiences of all students may be the subject of greater negotiation. (Healey, 2003, p. 26)*

In their review of the literature on teaching students with learning disabilities in the US, Orr and Hammig (2009) show that there is now rich evidence that certain teaching and assessment practices are appreciated by this group of students. While this review does not provide direct evidence of impacts on access, progression and retention, it does give insights into students' perspectives on certain inclusive practices. Like Hockings (2010), Orr and Hammig note the potential of the universal design approach to curriculum development. Considering specific flexible teaching and assessment strategies, these authors indicate that there is good student support for the value of using multiple means of content presentation, such as combining text with audio and video. The review also identified a number of studies that supported the use of flexible assessment techniques, such as utilising multiple types of assessment.

Another approach to flexibility in teaching and learning is through the use of personalised learning plans (formerly known as individualised learning plans). This approach has been used in schools, colleges and universities (Sebba *et al.*, 2007). According to Gilbert (2007) – although mainly talking about schools – personalised learning is about taking a “structured and responsive approach” to an individual’s learning so “that all are able to progress, achieve and participate”. This approach seeks to do this by strengthening the linkages between teaching and learning and engaging the learner as a partner. The concept has also been championed by David Miliband MP (2004) and by the OECD (2006).

Specifically in relation to higher education and engaging learners as partners, HEFCE commissioned a study to help Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) develop good practice in the area of personalised learning plans with the aim of supporting effective learning and progression where the needs of the learner were seen as paramount. Such plans were seen as key for Networks:

*... personalised learning planning should be seen primarily as a process that has the potential to enhance learner motivation and confidence, enable learners to have a sense of ownership of the learning process, improve decision-making skills and help in the management of transitions, for example between learning providers. Also, as a process it should provide a means of purposeful dialogue between learner and tutor, supporting engagement, retention and progression. Furthermore, personalised learning plans can be a mechanism for testing how well flexible, learner-centred curricula, with clear progression pathways, are understood and used by learners, and for ensuring that learner expectations are well managed. (Whitson, 2007, p1)*

The main findings of the study suggested that there was evidence in the literature that processes associated with personalised learning plans (PLPs) resulted in positive effects on student learning in relation to reflection, recording, planning and action. They also noted that potential benefits included: enhanced learner confidence and motivation; a greater sense of ownership of the learning process; improved decision making; and clear progression paths. The authors also noted potential benefits through the use of online PLP provision including:

*... more flexibility in when and how to access learning; the diversity of digital formats as evidence of learning; ease of re-using materials; and simpler and more cost-effective administration. (Ward and Richardson, 2007, p6)*

However, Pollard and James (2004, p. 6) take a slightly different view:

*Personalised Learning is not a matter of tailoring curriculum, teaching and assessment to 'fit' the individual, but is a question of developing social practices that enable people to become all that they are capable of becoming. Our research suggests too that AfL8 can sometimes be taken on at a superficial level without the deeper changes in practices and relationships which actually affect outcomes.*

Two reports on personalised learning and PLPs have been produced by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) under its Enhancement Themes<sup>9</sup>. The first, by Knox and Wyper (2008), reports on developments in personalisation of the first year and draws on six case studies of personalisation in practice. Four main reasons for a focus on the personalisation of the student experience in the first year were elicited from individual interviews and focus groups. These were: to counter the effects of large class sizes; to acknowledge individual learning styles; to engage and empower students; and to exploit the potential of new technologies (Knox and Wyper, 2008, p. 2).

The various case studies all illustrated the use of personalisation strategies in differing contexts. These included: personalised integrated learning support to build a holistic student support model; preparatory resit support through a structured personal revision programme; empowering the student through enhanced engagement to encourage students to take ownership of their own learning; to develop meta-learning by empowering them to personalise their learning through designing, controlling and reflecting on their learning; personalising assessments to empower students to make responsible choices of assessment methods and equipping them to build on their strengths and develop their weaknesses; and providing online learning materials to accommodate diversity in student ability, aptitude and aspiration to allow students flexible access and the ability to personalise resources to aid depth and breadth of understanding (Knox and Wyper, 2008, p. 3).

They note that the evidence from the case studies suggests that students value personalisation whether in the form of choice in the curriculum, access to online resources in their own time (and place) or personal support to ameliorate earlier failures in academic performance.

Knox and Wyper (2008, p. 4) provide a number of recommendations targeted specifically at managers and policy makers, lecturers and practitioners, and students. These include the development and implementation of personalised learning environments and social software and:

*... space in the curriculum to teach students how to learn and give them time to learn how to learn, particularly if they are first generation entrants into HE and have little social and cultural capital resource ... empower (their) students by creating a student-centred curriculum through which students can take control of, and responsibility for, their own learning.*

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9 See <http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/>.

Finally, Knox and Wyper recognise that students have a responsibility to take active participation in their own learning in partnership with staff, and that they should take responsibility to be a resource through sharing information materials and sources of support with peers.

The second QAA report by Miller *et al.* (2008) focused on a specific aspect of personalised learning, that of personal development planning (PDP). The report drew on four case studies and provided a number of main recommendations summarised under six broad themes (*ibid.*, pp. 2-3):

- *PDP in the first year: which included the recommendation that institutions should clearly state areas and levels of student support;*
- *Transition: where time and resources should be allocated to PDP discussions and activities and opportunities for peer mentoring should be expanded;*
- *Pedagogy and Assessment: where the relationship of PDP tools and processes to pedagogy and assessment should be clearly stated and discussed with students;*
- *Engagement: where the careers staff should be involved in the development and implementation of PDP in non-vocational courses in order to encourage employability and engagement;*
- *Delivery: where the relationship between human and online elements should be clearly discussed with students and the design online systems should be clearly linked to pedagogical or other goals and discussed with users; and,*
- *Support: where staff training should be offered to raise awareness of the benefits of PDP, students encouraged to participate in peer support and mentoring and ‘buddy’ initiatives.*

The authors suggest that a clear rationale for implementing PDP is the benefit it can bring. For example, among the benefits to students the authors include: a recognition of the linkages between personal identity, social networks and academic learning; the provision of a framework or structure to bridge different educational settings and different elements of the first-year cycle; the personalisation of the mass experience of the first year; the linking of employability to the curriculum; and the provision of information about how they will be supported when experiencing critical or significant incidents (Miller *et al.*, 2008, p.4).

Many of the benefits cited above may be of particular importance to non-traditional students who often lack knowledge of the processes of higher education, who may have quite different expectations about the roles of teaching and support staff and have little experience or knowledge of higher education delivery and assessment regimes.

Two projects relating to e-portfolios and personalised learning under the auspices of *Enhancing Learner Progression* (ELP) have been funded by JISC. The first, ELP1<sup>10</sup>, aimed to:

*... examine the use of e-portfolios at three key points in this learning journey - student progression into Higher Education, through Higher Education, and into work - to evaluate if and how e-support assists students in managing these key transitions.*

The second, ELP2<sup>11</sup>, built on ELP1 and aimed to:

*... investigate, identify and evaluate solutions to the issues and challenges that arise in providing a personalised learning experience which meets the needs of individual lifelong learners in a range of settings. The project will explore these issues through the use of e-Portfolios and social software (Web 2.0) to support widening participation and the development of skills essential to successful lifelong learning.*

In relation to ELP1, Higgison, Currant and Murray (2006) report that in relation to progression to HE, the use of e-portfolios in the case studies and in the three distinct contexts noted above produced a number of positive outcomes, impacts and instances of change. In relation to outcomes, they included the development of a training programme for work-based staff in the use of e-portfolios and the creation of good practice guidance in the e-support of students.

One of the main aims of ELP2 was to increase engagement using social software. A two-stage approach was adopted utilising a number of case studies. The first stage was to identify or characterise learners' experiences in using Web 2.0 technologies and their ability and willingness to transfer this ability and skill to a learning context. The second stage was to include a detailed qualitative evaluation of the learner experience.

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10 See <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/edistributed/bradfordelp.aspx>.

11 See <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/elearningcapital/xinstit1/elp2.aspx>.

However, and perhaps relevant in relation to non-traditional students, not all groups were able or willing to access or benefit from the use of Web 2.0 technology. In addition, a number of issues and benefits were identified for institutions thinking of implementing Web 2.0 technologies for learning and teaching:

*Issues include poor digital and personal skills of the learners, where even the digitally experienced and digital socialites may not necessarily have experience in the creation and production aspects of web 2.0 technologies such as blogs and wikis. Secondly, many participants, especially the under 18s, seem to lack a range of skills unrelated to technology but important for community building, group work and collaboration, including information literacy and time and organisational management skills. Mature learners, who appear to have higher levels of these personal learning skills, particularly where they are digitally experienced, appear to be more resilient and persistent in engaging with web 2.0 to support their learning and are convinced of its relevance and purpose ... Benefits were more likely to be realised where both the learners and tutors are digitally experienced (which includes digital socialites). Not all learners in these case studies engaged with the online activities and community even where they perceived potential benefits. Learners do not engage for a variety of reasons including lack of confidence in their skills and a fear of appearing silly ... or because they are unable to see their value for learning. (Higgison, 2009, p. 8)*

Finally, the project claimed some measure of success for personalised leaning in enhancing learner progression in four key areas: social networking; digital storytelling; basic IT internet skills and safety; and student-initiated social networks.

Overall, the literature on the impact of flexible teaching, learning and assessment practices suggests that much is still to be done to specifically meet the needs of students from under-represented groups. While there are many examples of good practice, the overall picture is one of modest and formulaic adjustments. As significant is the fact that at present this literature is not sufficiently well developed to make strong statements about the impact of such flexible practices on the access, retention and progression of students from under-represented groups.

### **Timing and duration of delivery**

In the context of this synthesis, flexibility in the timing of delivery encompasses programmes offered in the evenings and weekends.

Flexibility in duration of delivery of programmes is exemplified by the introduction of foundation degrees, the use of short-cycle higher education and the options of accelerated or decelerated learning (Outram, 2009, p. 3).

Recent research by Yorke and Longden (2008) highlights the need for flexible teaching and assessment practices to support the flexibility offered by part-time study. They report on the findings from a survey of almost 3,000 part-time students drawn from 11 Post-1992 institutions. Yorke and Longden found their part-time respondents generally positive about their student experience, with the highest-rated features being those relating to programme quality, engagement with others on their course, and institutional facilities (especially libraries and computing resources). Less positive responses were obtained in relation to: coping with the demands of work, life and study; and feedback.

They also report that, while the findings were generally positive in relation to programme quality, course organisation posed some concerns, especially for the relatively high number of part-time students studying alongside full-time students:

*The main complaint was that insufficient attention was given to their part-time status in the way in which the programme was implemented: as examples, turn-around time on assignments was inconsiderately tight, and it was not always possible for part-time students to join in activities that presented few logistical problems for their full-time counterparts. Second, administrative and other institutional services were not available at the times when the part-time students attended. (Yorke and Longden, 2008, p. 3)*

Yorke and Longden suggest that one of the most important reasons for the respondents to choose to study part-time was the flexibility offered and the opportunities it allowed to study alongside other commitments of family and employment:

*The flexibility that part-time study allowed, and its relative affordability, were by some distance the second and third most acknowledged reasons. The most frequently-stated reason given for studying was the students' desire to improve their capability in their current job. (Yorke and Longden, 2008, p. 2)*

Finally, in summarising the findings of their research, Yorke and Longden note that:

*The most important issue raised by this study (which has a number of practical ramifications) is whether institutions make provision appropriate to the needs of part-time students, and avoid making the uncritical assumption that part-time students can simply be accommodated on programmes designed for their full-time counterparts. At a time when the policy interest is increasingly focusing on the development of ways in which higher education engages with society, this study offers a number of pointers towards institutional self-analysis and action. (2008, p. 3)*

In addition to the different experiences of university enjoyed by part- and full-time students (Yorke, 1999; Yorke and Longden, 2008), they often have quite different work/life/study balances. Part-time students frequently have work commitments and/or caring responsibilities, coupled with financial problems associated with the current funding regime for part-time study in HE, as noted elsewhere (King, 2008). McGivney (1996) and Schuller and Bamford (2000) suggest that other factors may increase the difficulties of juggling study and domestic commitments for women specifically, including negative peer pressure and reactionary attitudes in their social networks. This can mean that, despite the initial support of partners or spouses, eventually continuation with their studies is discouraged.

The final report of the Flexible Learning Pathfinder pilot scheme (Outram, 2009) suggests that there are groups of students for whom flexible learning provision is more desirable than traditional provision. This finding resulted in the funding of eight pilot schemes under a HEFCE Strategic Development Fund (SDF). As noted by Outram, flexible pathways often allow learners to progress more quickly through vocational routes to higher education, to undertake study while working and also allow new types of learners to engage with higher education. Results from the pilots also suggest that the provision of flexible learning pathways are attractive to employers and professional bodies.

However, Outram (ibid., p. 6) notes that schemes need careful market research and marketing to achieve greater understanding and awareness on the part of both learners and providers. In relation to what the pilots achieved, the overall impression provided by Outram is positive. The pilots were successful in: developing their academic infrastructure to facilitate the development of effective flexible learning delivery; creating new learning partnerships; and engaging employers. All were able to lever organisational and infrastructural development to support flexible learning delivery. A number of the pilots also extended the academic year to allow accelerated completion of a degree:

*Different solutions were tried in relation to how to compress a three-year degree programme at the same time as allowing students to transfer out of an accelerated degree if the need arises. Delivery through the summer was the most common solution. (Outram, 2009, p. 8)*

Outram (2009) also notes the importance of achieving cultural change and the recognition that flexible learning needs flexible infrastructures. He also emphasises the need for staff development to ensure that flexibility becomes embedded at the institutional level. It is suggested that if such change does not occur, then the viability and sustainability of the flexible pathways will be more difficult once funding ceases, given the relatively high initial costs of developing them including associated infrastructural costs. Finally, a list of the implications of attempting to introduce flexible learning pathways is provided for institutions thinking of developing such provision.

## Conclusions and implications for stakeholders

### Policy makers

In their response to a request from BIS in December 2009 for advice on trends in demand for flexible learning and how it might be encouraged (submitted July 2010), the HEFCE pointed to the priorities behind the request, which included '*widening participation: promoting and providing the opportunity of successful participation in higher education to everyone who can benefit from it*'.

As we have seen there is a great deal of activity directed at widening participation and flexible ways to achieve this. Policy drivers have included The Schwartz Review - Fair Admissions to Higher Education (2004), which resulted in the setting up of programmes designed to improve the equity of the admissions system (see also UUK, 2008 and the Sutton Trust, 2009); and later, the 'New Opportunities' white paper, published in January 2009, which announced the establishment of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions (PFAP) (<http://www.bis.gov.uk/policies/higher-education/access-to-professions/panel-on-fair-access-professions>). This was charged with 'making a professional career genuinely open to as wide a pool of talent as possible' (PFAP, 2009: p5).

Overall there have been improvements in relation to many of the performance indicators used to measure progress in widening access (and non-continuation) of target groups although in many cases the improvements have been relatively small. However, a number of the

studies reviewed laid much of the blame for differential rates of participation on poor prior educational achievement (rather than lack of appropriately flexible provision), and suggest that interventions need to be implemented at an earlier stage in the educational cycle than was considered historically in order to have a more significant impact on widening access.

Whilst moves towards the acceptance of vocational qualifications have contributed to widening participation in relation to lower socio-economic groups, entrants have been shown to be more likely to be older, male, from an ethnic minority and/or disabled than traditional entrants. Further, issues of parity of esteem between vocational qualifications and traditional academic qualifications have been shown to represent a continuing barrier to flexible entry based on credit transfer in some institutions and credit frameworks have not necessarily solved such difficulties. Also there is little evidence that APEL has made any significant contribution to widening participation in HE.

Despite an increase in both the provision of HE courses in FECs and to a lesser extent FE provision in HEIs, the research literature points to a continuing need to improve routes into higher education for those who have already left school at a disadvantage, for example, by continuing to improve the articulation between vocational training and higher education. An expansion in well targeted and relevant work based learning opportunities would also be valuable. There is, for example, good evidence that close and highly planned links between FE and HE and cognisance of the issues in transition, can work well and can deliver HE opportunities to WP students that are also scalable and efficient for institutions.

In terms of equity of access to, and progression through HE, and in the context of the (albeit) small improvements in the relative numbers of students from under-represented groups, a number of commentators have noted that these students have tended to go to lower status institutions, reinforcing pre-existing inequalities in participation by institutional type and by subject, with potential long term consequences for students in terms of likely economic returns from their participation in HE. Also, and significantly, those institutions that have been most successful at widening participation have often been shown to have the highest rates of non-continuation. Retention is a highly complex issue and the evidence appears contradictory and often context specific, relating to a wide range of factors such as entry qualifications, gender, age and subject choice (Yorke, 1999). The extent to which more flexible provision – for example in terms of mode, site and delivery of provision – could

mitigate against non-completion is, however, not clear. Mode of delivery, for example (e.g. in terms of use of blended learning, e-learning, distance and personalised learning), has been shown to have implications for the support needs of certain groups of students (Bennett *et al.*, 2008) if they are not to be disadvantaged.

In terms of future directions in flexible provision and the potential to impact on successful participation by under-represented groups, evidence from the analysis of the Widening Participation Strategic Assessments (Thomas *et al.* 2010) indicates that Foundation Degrees have been widely adopted (especially in certain types of institution) to provide alternative study modes and qualification outcomes. However, HEFCE (2011), in its detailed examination of three types of flexible provision, suggests that, in the current financial climate, it is unlikely that provision of Foundation Degrees and accelerated degrees will experience growth. It is also noted that a lack of credibility with employers and with those based outside the UK will impact on any growth in accelerated provision. However, it does suggest that if student support issues are addressed high intensity (50%+) part-time provision may experience some growth.

An important point made in the review of non-participants and those involved in part-time studies in higher education is that efforts to encourage more of those seen to be 'potentially recruitable' to HE will not only require them to be convinced of the relevance of participation, but will also require flexible solutions to accommodate their learning needs. However, the impact of moves to remove the distinction between part-time and full-time study as a result of the recommendations of the Browne Review, particularly in relation to the funding regime, remain to be seen. Fuller *et al.* (2008), for example, highlighted the perceptions of parents and their personal networks that there was little return from participation in HE.

The supply/demand equation is clearly highly relevant in relation to the potential role of any policy and funding incentives designed to encourage institutions to offer more flexible learning opportunities. Whilst there appears to be a relative lack of certain forms of flexible provision - for example, there is little by way of a systematic offer in relation to mode of delivery (part-time, blended, distance learning), timing and site in many universities – a number of sources cited question whether there is sufficient demand to justify significant change (SQW, 2006; Fuller *et al.* 2008a; HEFCE 2011). HEFCE (2011) points to the fact that there would need to be not only changes in support arrangements but also a significant cultural shift amongst potential students themselves if HEIs

were to move away from the traditional model of delivery. The evidence does not appear to support such a change in demand from students themselves as yet.

### **Institutions**

Institutions could place more emphasis on flexible learning being part of their mainstream practice in certain situations and contexts. These might include:

- Improving the routes into higher education for those who have already left school at a disadvantage, for example, by continuing to improve the articulation between vocational training and higher education, and more extensive recognition of alternative qualifications. An expansion in well targeted and relevant work based learning opportunities would also be valuable.
- Staff development. This would include improved support for: admissions staff to expand knowledge and awareness of alternative routes and qualifications; professional staff to support and develop an increasingly diverse student population; and for educational developers and teaching staff to support the introduction of more inclusive learning, teaching and assessment practice, including recognition of the role of universal design in curriculum design for a diverse student body..
- Reviewing and building flexibility in delivery, mode and timing of programmes in the context of student profiles to facilitate recruitment and success. Some relatively simple measures such as routine timetabling of some modules in the evening or delivery of some modules through blended or distance learning mode might not only suit all students, but also open up opportunities for participation to the traditionally non-participating groups. However, improvements to the technical infrastructure may be required to cope with increased demands on IT resources.

### **Employers**

There are some signs of success in relation to the workplace being utilised as a site of learning for WP groups, but stronger financial levers from the government may be needed in order to build upon existing success stories, especially if SMEs are to be encouraged to offer such opportunities.

### **Community groups**

There appears to be much potential for community-based arrangements to encourage WP, but little evidence of direct access to HEIs for

community organisations. The pledges of the English Policy Document, the Learning Revolution, (DIUS 2009) provide the basis for development in this area. The focus is on informal adult learning, including within the workplace and a variety of community settings, but HEFCE is charged with setting out 'how HEIs can work with others to support the wider engagement of the community through informal learning'. DIUS, with Universities UK, committed to 'identify the extent of current activity and disseminate best practice to promote informal learning, encourage access and make more visible the work HEIs do for adult learners that could be taken up further by the communities they serve' (DIUS, p. 20). So whilst the main focus is informal learning, more attention on this aspect of provision, and to building partnerships across stakeholders, may turn informal into formal transitions.

### **Students**

In much of the research reviewed, flexibility has been shown to provide benefits in relation to access, retention and progression and may contribute to widening participation amongst groups currently under-represented in HE. When it operates as it should, it can give students a real feeling of ownership in what, when and where they study and the pace and intensity of that study.

However, one issue identified is the variability across the sector in relation to the availability of flexible options and even within institutions flexibility may be more prevalent in some subject areas than in others. In addition, potential students often lack the information they need about progression routes and the options available to them in terms of pace, intensity and timing of delivery in order to make fully informed choices.

### **Research**

There is a need to fund large-scale research into the impact of flexible learning on widening participation as many areas have been identified in which the findings were inconclusive. There is a particular gap in terms of data on the impact of flexible provision on all aspects of participation and subsequent retention and progression beyond higher education. Without robust data, it is simply not possible to gauge the scope and scale of the some of the types of flexibility in delivery reviewed, or their success (or lack of it). There are very few, if any, systematic longitudinal studies from the point of access through university and beyond. In particular there is little evidence of any significant longitudinal research on the relationship between flexibility and widening participation.

## Practical Applications

### **Project on e-Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (eAPEL)**

<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/elearningcapital/xinstit1/eapel.aspx#downloads>

One of the aims of this project was to create and develop a set of software tools intended to allow automation of the APEL process and therefore improve the service to potential entrants (see also Haldane et al., 2007). Malone (2009) in the final project report provides some background to the development of APEL and cites Corradi et al. (2006), who suggest that unlike the UK, at the European level, APEL is increasingly seen as an important element in the pursuit of widening participation.

## Literature reviews

Some of the following resources are specifically about widening participation, and contain material relevant to aspects of flexibility reviewed above.

### **Annotated bibliography of widening participation research**

<http://www.uel.ac.uk/continuum/publications/documents/JulieWPLitSearchReportNI.pdf>

A commissioned annotated bibliography and report prepared for the Department of Education and Learning Northern Ireland, Widening Access Expert Group.

### **Review of widening participation research: addressing the barriers to participation in higher education**

[http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rcreports/2006/rd13\\_06/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rcreports/2006/rd13_06/)

Report to HEFCE by University of York, Higher Education Academy and Institute for Access Studies.

### **Widening participation in higher education**

<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/wpheqt/resources/bibliographies/wphe>

A bibliography from the University of Sussex on WP in HE.

### **Aptitude testing for university entrance: A literature review**

<http://www.nfer.ac.uk/nfer/publications/APL01/APL01.pdf>

A study by the National Foundation for Educational Research on the possible role that aptitude testing may play in the admissions process for university entrance.

**The first-year experience: a literature review for the Higher Education Academy (Harvey *et al.*, 2006).**

[http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/archive/first\\_year\\_experience\\_full\\_report.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/archive/first_year_experience_full_report.pdf)

This literature review aims to consider the research literature and institutional 'grey material' exploring the undergraduate and postgraduate first-year experience and to identify key emerging issues to inform university policy makers, practitioners, researchers and other interested parties.

**The undergraduate experience of blended e-learning: a review of UK literature and practice (Sharpe *et al.*, 2006)**

[http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/teachingandresearch/Undergraduate\\_Experience](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/teachingandresearch/Undergraduate_Experience)

The review report addresses the current meanings of 'blended learning' across the sector, the underlying institutional rationales for blended learning, the monitoring and evaluation strategies being adopted for ensuring and enhancing the quality of blended e-learning.

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