The contribution of further education and sixth-form colleges to widening participation

A literature synthesis of the Widening Access, Student Retention and Success National Programmes Archive

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Dr Marion Bowl, School of Education, University of Birmingham

Correspondence address: The Higher Education Academy, Innovation Way, York Science Park, Heslington, York, YO10 5BR, United Kingdom.

Email: retentionandsuccess@heacademy.ac.uk
Tel: +44 (0)1904 717500

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1. Core definition of synthesis theme

Further education (FE) and sixth form colleges in England provide a mix of academic and vocational education from basic training to higher education, primarily for learners who are not in compulsory education. Their responsibilities may span learners from age 14 to post-retirement. They are autonomous institutions established under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. Many colleges also offer programmes of higher education (at Level 4 and above). Historically Higher National Certificate and Diploma (HNC and HND) qualifications and, in some colleges, Honours-level studies have been offered through franchise arrangements with higher education institutions (HEIs). Since 2001, however, foundation degrees that are offered within the FE sector became an important strand of the New Labour Government’s strategy to widen HE participation, particularly among learners following vocational education and training routes. FE colleges have therefore become significant providers of higher education.

This synthesis focuses first on the efforts of further education and sixth form colleges to widen participation by enabling progression and successful transition to higher education from Levels 2 and 3 of the National Qualifications Framework, particularly from vocational routes. Second it discusses the role of colleges in offering higher education (HE in FE) as a means of widening access to higher education.

2. Summary

This synthesis of the literature in the WASRS national archive reviews the contribution made by further education and sixth form colleges to widening participation. It focuses on the role of colleges in encouraging and supporting students from under-represented groups (in particular those on vocationally oriented courses) to progress to higher education. It also discusses the role of colleges as dual-sector institutions, offering higher education programmes in the further education sector. The key themes and findings are:

- **Involvement in formal and informal partnerships:** Regional Aimhigher partnerships to widen participation have involved further education and sixth form colleges in a range of activities and collaborations. Institution-to-institution partnerships, formal progression agreements and regional Lifelong Learning Networks have provided opportunities for relationship-building, which can benefit progression for college-based learners.
  
  The sustainability of formal institutional partnerships for widening participation is likely to vary depending on whether there is an ethos of competition or collaboration and the extent to which FE is viewed as an equal partner. Informal relationship-building between further and higher education, while strongly advocated, tended to be hampered by lack of time and staff cover within colleges.

- **Support for progression: awareness-raising, information, advice and guidance:** Reports suggest the importance of colleges in providing advice, guidance and support for vocational learners making progression decisions. In relation to work-based learners it appears that both students and employers prefer colleges to take an IAG role.

  Recommendations that emerge from these reports included: the development of college IAG strategies, structured progression support planning, a clear delineation of the respective roles of tutors and specialist careers guidance staff and staff development to keep tutors abreast of progression opportunities. Reports also highlight the need for more rigorous tracking of learners’ progression from vocational and work-based routes.

- **Targeting for widening participation:** The reports of Lifelong Learning Networks’ initiatives present evidence of colleges’ commitment to increasing opportunities for vocational learners to progress to higher level educational opportunities. However, members of under-represented groups themselves do not tend to be targeted; rather there has been a preference for a ‘whole class’
approach to targeting learners in specific vocational areas. This approach may have the negative effect of overlooking the needs of learners who have experienced specific disadvantages.

- **Curriculum initiatives to aid the transition**: The principal curricular response to smoothing the transition to higher level study for vocational students has been the establishment of compensatory bridging courses and modules. The deficits identified focused on academic writing and related skills. While it was generally agreed that bridging programmes and modules were needed, the question of accreditation and funding for such support was at the forefront of colleges’ considerations. Non-academic issues are also signalled – in particular, the concern of students about practical, rather than academic matters as well as the culture and ethos of higher education. A consideration in discussions about bridging gaps in the transition is the continuing lack of ‘fit’ between vocational and academic curricula and whose responsibility it is to bridge the gap – colleges, higher education institutions – or both.

- **Dual-sector institutions: higher education in further education colleges**: Higher education offered in further education institutions has made a contribution to widening participation. Foundation degrees, developed in FE colleges, have provided a range of vocationally-oriented programmes at higher education level. However, issues remain to be resolved if a seamless progression from FE to HE study is to be achieved. Some of the obstacles are embedded in the historical divide between academic and vocational study. It is difficult to see how these will be overcome in a situation of increased competition for students. Another problem has been the articulation between available programmes and modes of study at FE and HE levels and between foundation degrees and top-up programmes.

Overall the report suggests some of the factors that contribute to the sustainability of partnerships developed through Aimhigher and Lifelong Learning Networks. These are particularly relevant in the light of the cessation of Government funding for partnership initiatives. It also draws attention to the need for clear frameworks for information, advice and guidance as well as more focused targeting and closer monitoring of efforts to encourage progression among the most disadvantaged groups. Finally, the report suggests a number of gaps in knowledge around the role of colleges in widening participation that could be addressed by further research.

### 3. Explanatory context

Colleges clearly have a contribution to make in relation to widening participation practice. First they offer an opportunity to work in partnership with others to support the progression of both younger and older people who would not have considered higher education before. Second, college staff are a key potential source of information, advice and guidance about progression routes for vocational and work-based learners. Third, further education has the potential to ‘bridge’ the transition to higher level study. Furthermore the growth of higher education in further education, through the development of foundation degrees in particular, has opened up more locally based, flexible opportunities for higher level study aimed at older, work-based learners.

**The role of further education and sixth form colleges in progression to higher education**

School students considering their future work and study options need to decide between continuing their academic studies to A-level, looking for a job or work-based training place, or enrolling on a vocational training course at a further education or sixth form college (Percy and Hudson, 2007). For young people whose school experience has not been positive or who do not see themselves as ‘academic’, the third option may offer the opportunity to focus on a vocational area aligned with their interests, aptitudes and
future career aspirations. It may be seen as a chance to progress to a more ‘adult’ educational environment, free of some of the constraints of schooling. However, the decision to take a vocational route has historically been an obstacle to progression to higher education, particularly to elite universities. Further education colleges have also offered progression opportunities to adults returning to education through work-based training routes or, via Access courses, to those who wish to access higher education but lack the standard A-level entry qualifications. Class and curricula differences are built into the divide between further and higher education (Hatt and Tate, 2009). While middle-class students are likely to progress through school-based academic routes to full-time university study, students from lower socio-economic groups are more likely to take vocational training routes in further education or sixth form colleges. Thus, any plan to broaden the socio-economic base of higher education needs to take into account the potential contribution of colleges in motivating, advising and preparing students for higher level study. Similarly the historical misalignment between vocationally focused, college-based study and university academic expectations means that colleges, along with universities, have a role in smoothing the transition to higher education. The role of colleges in this regard has been widely recognised, as has the need to include them in programmes to widen participation (Hatt and Tate, 2009).

Partnerships involving universities, colleges, schools, careers services, local authorities and others, became a particular focus of activity as a result of the 1997-2010 New Labour Government’s aim to broaden the social base of higher education. From 2004, Aimhigher partnerships brought together two predecessor schemes – Excellence Challenge and Partnerships for Progression (P4P) – into one integrated programme with regionally devolved funding. The integration of these two schemes was accompanied by a stronger focus on younger, school-based learners than had been the case, although colleges were still to be involved in regional widening participation partnerships. This is reflected in the relatively poor coverage in reports of the role of colleges within Aimhigher partnerships. The shift of policy focus to younger learners also accounts for the relative lack of discussion in the archive papers of mature learners entering further education from non-work-based routes (for example via Access courses). This synthesis draws on reports and research on the Aimhigher programme that refer specifically to the role of further education and sixth form colleges.

A second strand of Government policy, from 2004 to 2010, in which colleges were key players, was the progression of vocational and work-based learners to higher level study. Lifelong Learning Networks (LLN) were established to facilitate progression into and through vocational education. The focus of Lifelong Learning Networks (LLN) were established to facilitate progression into and through vocational education. The focus of Lifelong Learning Networks was:

- Curriculum development to facilitate progression from vocational courses to higher education. For colleges this involved developing programmes that bridged the gap between vocational training and university-level education. In this, the development of vocationally oriented foundation degrees in further education colleges was seen as important.
- Information, advice and guidance. This has involved clarifying the respective roles of colleges and employers in providing information and advice on progression routes and supporting vocational learners to consider and apply to study at higher levels.
- Formal progression agreements that defined the expectations about entry to higher education for vocational learners and for staff in different types of institution and enabled the transfer of credit for different forms of study and the recognition of prior education and learning (Newby, 2004).

LLNs were charged with trying out different approaches to developing and supporting the progression of vocational learners. Reports and evaluations of LLN initiatives are therefore integral to this synthesis.

**Higher education in further education: dual-sector institutions**

The Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) recognised the role of further education in extending higher education opportunities to a wider section of the population, while promoting national economic growth. The accessibility of colleges in relation to location, culture, ethos and curriculum placed them in a good position to reach out to learners whose progression through the school system had not been satisfactory or successful. In the past ten years colleges have become significant providers of higher education particularly at
sub-degree level. Dual-sector institutions (those providing programmes of higher education within a primarily further education institution) have therefore been in the forefront of widening participation. Furthermore, the introduction since 1997 of vocationally oriented foundation degrees has stimulated growth in higher education provision in colleges. Dual-sector provision is an important aspect of the role of colleges in widening participation in higher education, which is addressed here. The Action on Access national overview of the role of FE colleges in providing higher education opportunities has been drawn on in this synthesis to illuminate how colleges have approached widening participation in respect of their higher education provision.

4. Methods

This synthesis brings together the findings of research studies and reports produced by Aimhigher, Action on Access and regional Lifelong Learning Networks. It draws out the main themes and lessons for practitioners, policy makers, academics and students. The approach adopted was first to identify and summarise all the reports in the WASRS archive that made substantial reference to the contribution of further education and sixth form colleges. From these reports a selection of best available evidence was made. The following selection criteria were applied:

- Relevance: is the report relevant to the synthesis title and to the aims of the synthesis project as a whole?
- Scope: is the report sufficiently broad in scope to be of wider interest to the synthesis readership (for example, from the point of view of curriculum area or geographical coverage)?
- Focus: is the report sufficiently focused to make key issues visible?
- Rigour: has attention been paid to issues of validity, reliability, ethics and avoidance of bias in the collection, presentation and analysis of data/information for the report?
- Applicability: can the findings of the report be applied to and/or compared with other geographical or institutional contexts?

An initial search of the WASRS resources archive revealed 95 documents in which reference was made to further education/sixth form colleges’ role in widening participation. The Refworks bibliographic database was used to catalogue these documents and to develop brief abstracts and summary notes on each document. Refworks was also used to categorise each contribution using keywords. These keywords were then aggregated into a set of themes and sub-themes that could be used to structure the synthesis. A further, closer reading of the 95 reports was undertaken and 23 reports were selected for more detailed reading and summary. This number was then reduced to seven key reports, grouped under the themes identified, which met the selection criteria outlined above. The findings from these papers synthesised below are thematically organised as follows:

- involvement formal and informal partnerships;
- support for progression: awareness-raising, information, advice and guidance;
- targeting under-represented groups;
- curriculum initiatives to aid the transition;
- dual-sector institutions: higher education in further education colleges.

5. Key research reports

Provides an overview of the ways in which colleges approached widening participation and their plans for widening participation activity from 2009 to 2012. Based on an analysis of 83 colleges’ widening participation strategic assessments (WPSA), submitted to HEFCE in 2009.

**Aimhigher Greater Manchester (2009) Exploring support for progression to higher education for young full-time vocational learners in further education colleges. Manchester: Aimhigher Greater Manchester.**

A report of research conducted into the transition of young learners from vocational courses in further education colleges to higher education. The report reviews existing research on the progression of vocational learners as well as analysing data from interviews with learners and practitioners. It describes the barriers and enablers to higher education progression and suggests transferrable lessons from practice.

**Hatt, S. and Tate, J. (2009) Aimhigher and Colleges: a report presented to the Aimhigher area partnerships in the South West Region. Aimhigher Southwest Region.**

A report on the way in which colleges in the south-west of England worked within a regional Aimhigher partnership to target the progression of learners from under-represented groups. The report utilised a review of the relevant research and policy literature, together with questionnaires and interviews with staff, to identify different models of college engagement with Aimhigher and different approaches to sustaining Aimhigher activity after the withdrawal of Government funding in 2011.


Report of a study that explored why committed students on further education creative arts programmes tend to reject the idea of progressing to higher education. The research drew on discussions with students and staff in colleges and universities to highlight areas in which colleges and universities could take action to encourage progression: curriculum development, information advice and guidance; and opportunities for learning while working.


An evaluation of a newly developed bridging module designed to encourage vocational learners to progress into and through higher education. The report includes a review of the literature on bridging and study skills courses aimed at vocational learners.


Examples of work and research undertaken by Lifelong Learning Networks across England between 2006 and 2011 and the lessons learned from practice. Examples include: peer mentoring, tutor visits to universities, bridging programmes to aid the transition from foundation to Honours-level study and initiatives targeted towards specific groups and curriculum areas.


A synopsis of Lifelong Learning Network research. The report makes recommendations for enhancing widening participation practice covering advice and guidance, accreditation of prior experience and learning, skills for progression to higher education, facilitating the transition to higher education, employer engagement and curriculum development.
6. Synthesis of research findings

As suggested in Section 5, the key reports from the archive discussed below were selected on the basis of their wider potential applicability. The reports in the archive on the role of FE and sixth form colleges take a range of approaches. First, there are those that summarise a number of small-scale studies in order to identify key themes, recommendations and areas for further research (for example, Shaw et al., 2011; Wise and Shaw, 2011). Second, there were a number of reports of scoping projects that explored the feasibility of specific widening participation initiatives (including Rout et al., 2009). A third type of report explored issues and initiatives related to particular curriculum areas or under-represented groups (for example, Percy and Hudson, 2007; Leonard, 2011). Fourth, a number of reports (for example, Hatt and Tate, 2009; Action on Access 2009) discussed more generally the role of FE colleges in widening participation. Limited evidence was found of research on the overall impact of FE colleges’ efforts to widen participation. The synthesis below therefore details the insights and main recommendations from the evidence that was available.

The following themes are covered in this synthesis:
- involvement in formal and informal partnerships;
- support for progression: awareness-raising, information, advice and guidance;
- targeting under-represented groups;
- curriculum initiatives to aid transition;
- dual-sector institutions: higher education in further education colleges.

6.1. Involvement in formal and informal partnerships

Further education and sixth form colleges have engaged in a range of collaborative relationships in the context of widening participation: formally as members of Aimhigher partnerships and Lifelong Learning Networks through franchising and progression agreements; and less formally through cultivating relationships with schools, universities, employers, local authorities and other agencies. The interface between colleges and universities has been particularly important in respect of vocational learners’ progression. Some colleges have entered partnerships with one HEI while others have developed a number of local, and sometimes national, collaborations (Action on Access, 2009). The evidence from the reports summarised here suggests that colleges have viewed formal partnerships as an important aspect of their widening participation strategies. However, it also suggests that the success of partnerships may be constrained by a number of factors: for example, universities may not uniformly be willing to enter into collaborations that limit their autonomy in setting admissions criteria; relationships of competition may work against collaboration where a further education college is also a provider of higher education programmes, in competition with another university or college, or where two or more colleges are in direct competition for students enrolling on vocational courses (Hatt and Tate, 2009). The evidence also suggests that informal relationship-building between staff in colleges and universities can offer useful opportunities for information exchange and developing mutual understanding, which, in turn, may benefit vocational learners considering progressing to higher education. However, such exchanges require the commitment of time and resources on the part of colleges, which is not always available (Percy and Hudson, 2007; Aimhigher Greater Manchester, 2009).

**Aimhigher partnerships**

The literature suggests that local and cross-institutional partnerships are crucial to supporting efforts to widen participation (Action on Access, 2009). The specifics of the role and status of colleges in partnerships, however, has received limited attention and this is perhaps indicative of the school-to-university focus of the Aimhigher programme. Aimhigher partnerships were put in place as a mechanism for co-operation to widen participation. They required the active, locally co-ordinated collaboration of universities, schools, colleges, local authorities and other relevant organisations. Colleges’ role and contribution to Aimhigher partnerships...
may not, however, be seen as central within partnerships where there is a focus on progression from school and A-levels to full-time university study. An earlier evaluation of the HE/FE collaborations established in 1998-1999 noted that:

"FE is rarely a full partner. It is usually a stakeholder involved in certain initiatives, or an advisor brought in to help the partnership target its initiative. In this way they are often ‘used’, but they do not experience equal status within the partnership and yet they offer excellent progression routes for students into HE." (Institute for Access Studies, 2003, p. 4)

Further, a report by Aimhigher Greater Manchester (2009, p. 4) suggests that, while links have been built between colleges and universities to the benefit of vocational learners, these links may be more prevalent at ‘recruiting’ rather than ‘selecting’ universities and that this weakness results from a lack of dialogue between the two sectors.

One report that focuses on the contribution of colleges to Aimhigher partnerships offers some useful, research-based findings. Hatt and Tate (2009) report on research involving 31 colleges in the south-west of England that explored their engagement in regional partnerships to widen participation. Hatt and Tate conducted desk-based research, supported by interviews and questionnaires to explore how colleges, working through formal partnerships, have been involved in Aimhigher programmes targeting under-represented groups. They suggest a number of ways in which colleges may engage in partnerships through:

- Aimhigher activity in schools;
- college-based Aimhigher activities;
- workplace-based Aimhigher activities;
- engagement with the community;
- leadership of particular activity strands.

They argue that the nature and extent of colleges’ contributions to Aimhigher partnerships are influenced by locally and historically determined factors, including pre-existing institutional relationships. They also found that colleges’ involvement in Aimhigher depended on the approach taken by local partnerships and, in particular, whether they focused primarily on engagement with schools, with colleges, or both. Hatt and Tate found examples of all three models of engagement in partnerships they researched. They noted that strong engagement in Aimhigher-led widening participation activities required the involvement of college staff at middle as well as senior management levels to ensure that strategic decisions made by senior management were translated into practice.

**Lifelong Learning Networks**

Regional Lifelong Learning Networks foregrounded the role of vocational education providers in signposting progression routes to higher education, supporting the transition and providing higher level study opportunities, particularly for work-based, part-time learners. To that extent colleges occupied a more central role in LLNs than in some Aimhigher partnerships. One of the goals of LLNs was the development of progression agreements that defined expectations about entry to higher education for vocational learners and enabled the transfer of credit from different forms of study as well as the recognition of prior education and learning. This has clearly been a challenge in the context of a stratified higher education system in which ‘selecting’ and ‘recruiting’ universities may have quite different approaches to the admission of students with vocational qualifications (Little and Williams, 2008). Betts and Burrell (2011) in their review of the operation of progression agreements in the London Lifelong Learning Network draw attention to the complexity of and compromises involved in engaging some higher education institutions in partnerships around progression from vocational routes. Like Hatt and Tate (2009), they stress the need for ‘buy-in’ at senior, middle management and tutor levels: at senior management level to ensure strategic commitment, at middle
management level to enable commitments to be operationalised and at teacher level, to ensure that informal links are built and capitalised upon for the benefit of college-based learners.

Notwithstanding the challenges of developing progression agreements, some Lifelong Learning Networks have seen these as important in fostering positive links between Level 3 and 4 study, which benefit learner progression. For example, Percy and Hudson (2007) reporting on behalf of the Creative Way Network (which is concerned with progression of vocational learners in the creative arts in the east of London) suggest that progression agreements have helped to foster positive links between colleagues in the FE and HE sectors.

**Informal college links with higher education institutions**

There is evidence in a number of reports to suggest that, over and above formal partnerships, the informal links forged between staff in colleges and universities have assisted college staff to support students in making choices and applying to university and, in some instances, improved their chance of being accepted (Hatt and Tate, 2009). The report from Aimhigher Greater Manchester (2009, p. 20), for example, suggests that individual contacts at the level of day-to-day practice often had greater impact than strategic partnerships. The London-based Creative Way LLN report (Percy and Hudson, 2007, p. 75) supports this view and suggests the need for an ongoing supportive forum between further and higher education teachers, which encourages communication, the development of trust and sharing good practice. The ways in which informal networking between colleges and HEIs has been successfully encouraged have included:

- small group visits by FE staff to local university departments;
- support for college staff development on higher education applications processes;
- college visits from higher education students who have progressed from vocational qualifications.

Case studies of informal networking between college and university staff demonstrate the benefits for college tutors who may have come to teaching through industry routes and have therefore have not themselves experienced university study (for example, the case study of cross-institution exchanges described by Waring and Thomas in Shaw et al., 2009, pp. 4-9). However, sustaining this type of networking can be problematic for college staff with high teaching loads and when cover for such activities is not easy to obtain (Aimhigher Greater Manchester, 2009; Shaw et al., 2011). Again, the commitment of college management is highlighted as important in ensuring that strategies to facilitate progression are translated into practice.

**6.2. Support for progression: awareness-raising, information, advice and guidance**

One of the specific aims of Lifelong Learning Networks was to address the issue of information, advice and guidance to vocational learners:

> Compared with A level students, vocational learners are disadvantaged because they get less information from their parents and teachers and, in the case of work based learners, might even face hostility from their employers. (Hatt and Tate, 2009, p. 28)

Reports accessed for this synthesis confirm that college- and work-based vocational learners are disadvantaged in respect of awareness-raising, information, advice and guidance about progression opportunities. They are less likely than their A-level peers to have family experience of higher education progression; they may therefore be unable to draw on informal advice about what progression routes are available, what it is like to study in higher education and what benefits can be derived from a higher level qualification. Percy and Hudson (2007, p. 40) suggest that although discussion with family and friends is likely to be influential, there may be limitations on the advice offered through informal means. For example, in respect of creative studies, family members and friends may not have access to information about developing
opportunities and therefore advice may tend towards stereotyped notions of what it is to have a career in the creative industries.

The Aimhigher Greater Manchester research (2009) noted that college tutors saw employer engagement as being important. However, there is evidence that employers are not aware of progression opportunities beyond Level 3. Generally, employers appeared to regard the guidance role as best located in colleges. It is also suggested that employers may not feel that employee progression to higher education is a business priority: indeed it may even be perceived as a threat to the retention of valued staff (Wise and Shaw, 2011). Percy and Hudson (2007) report limited interaction with employers over future careers.

Specialist information, advice and guidance may too, have limitations for vocational learners. Aimhigher Greater Manchester's research (2009, p. 19) into support for the progression of young full-time vocational learners suggests that they do not readily access one-to-one specialist IAG services. In addition, while they may have generalised knowledge of a range of progression routes and opportunities, specialist careers advisers may lack detailed information about particular curriculum areas or industries (Percy and Hudson, 2007). This indicates the need within colleges for a co-ordinated approach to information, advice and guidance and for both individual and whole group support. While the Aimhigher Greater Manchester report (2009) identifies examples of co-ordinated work between tutors and careers guidance specialists, there appears to be lack of consistency and co-ordination within or between colleges and lack of clarity as to how and whether advice and guidance interventions complement each other. College teachers and tutors are widely acknowledged as a key source of information, advice and guidance around higher education:

_Tutors play a key role in advising and supporting learners’ progression decisions. Often learners see tutors as a more important source of support than advice and guidance specialists because they have subject specific expertise._ (Aimhigher Greater Manchester, 2009, p. ii)

Tutors may assist learners through:
- raising awareness of options beyond Level 3 study;
- discussing the longer terms benefits of university study;
- supporting decision-making around choice of institution and subject of study;
- offering guidance and support in the university applications process;
- providing information about university finance;
- advising students about the expectations of higher education study;
- facilitating university familiarisation visits.

However, reports suggest that the quality and utility of tutor advice may be inconsistent within colleges. Research carried out by Aimhigher Greater Manchester revealed variation between individual tutors in the extent to which they foregrounded progression in individual support plans and actively encouraged students and their families to consider HE as an option:

_Whilst some tutors proactively offer information and advice on subject and university choice, others are more reactive, attempting to answer specific learner queries or signposting to sources such as prospectuses and university websites._ (Aimhigher Greater Manchester, 2009, p. 11)

The authors of this report point to a lack of tutor training around the progression opportunities and suggest that this problem is exacerbated by changes in the configuration of qualifications and variable availability of particular progression routes (a point also made by Wise and Shaw, 2011). They also suggest that there are variations between colleges in the extent to which information, advice and guidance are successfully offered. Percy and Hudson (2007, pp. 44-45) confirm this from their research on the progression of vocational learners from Level 3 creative arts programmes. They suggest that co-ordinating mechanisms are not in always in place and that there is a lack of clarity in what is required of tutors.
Gaps have also been identified in support for apprentice progression. Kinnear’s (2010) research with two colleges in the west of England explored the challenges in supporting apprentice progression to higher level study – a key plank of the Coalition Government’s strategy to increase skill levels (BIS, 2010). Kinnear’s study aimed to investigate methods used to inform apprentices of progression routes and to offer training to college staff on progression routes. In common with other research reports, the west of England study found that employers lacked knowledge about progression routes and preferred colleges to take initiative on advising apprentices about progression opportunities. Face-to-face contact with college staff was reported as the preferred way of gaining information about progression possibilities.

Shaw et al. (2011) draw attention to the difficulty of tracking learners’ progression from vocational routes to higher level study. However, the findings from a number of reports suggest that there is a need for better tracking at regional and national level. This would enable a clearer picture to be developed of how these students fare in relation to application, acceptance and retention on particular programmes and at different higher education institutions. The following recommendations are collated from the findings of Percy and Hudson (2007), Aimhigher Greater Manchester (2009) and Wise and Shaw (2011) concerning colleges’ role in supporting progression through awareness-raising, information, advice and guidance:

- the need for colleges to develop institutional progression support plans that clarify the respective roles of tutors and specialist IAG staff;
- the need to build in early awareness-raising and information about progression for vocational learners in colleges;
- the importance of continuing professional development for college tutors around information, advice and guidance, which keeps them abreast of progression developments as well as clarifying their role in supporting progression;
- the need for a single access point for up-to-date information about courses and progression routes;
- the need for support from specialist careers advisers, to complement curriculum-specific advice from tutors;
- the importance of partnerships between colleges and higher education institutions to ensure that progression options and opportunities are clear to college staff;
- the need for better links to be made between college courses and employment opportunities;
- the need for a system to track learners’ progression from vocational and work-based routes.

6.3. Targeting under-represented groups

The potential for further education to act as a route to higher education for people from under-represented backgrounds is clear. However, the rate of college-based student applications to higher education has historically been lower than that of school students following academic routes. Colleges are therefore central to raising progression rates among people from under-represented groups:

*The very learners whom HE needs to recruit have been and still are the traditional clientele of further education colleges.* (Hatt and Tate, 2009, p. 8)

Hatt and Tate’s research on further education colleges’ involvement Aimhigher partnerships in the south-west of England, explored the extent to which colleges targeted groups identified by HEFCE as under-represented: learners from lower socio-economic groups and low participation neighbourhoods and disabled learners. They found that HEFCE target groups were generally not specifically addressed (a point also made by Action on Access, 2009). Colleges’ widening participation aims were more likely to be stated in the general context of equal opportunities based on ethnicity, gender, dis/ability and age. However, as Hatt and Tate (2009) point out, the lack of reference to social class in college statements may reflect, as much as anything, the fact that working-class and lower income students have always been a primary client group for colleges. Hatt and Tate suggest two reasons why targeting students from lower socio-economic groups does
not tend to find favour with college staff. First, the large number of eligible learners in further education would make selection impossible; second, singling out specific students for targeted assistance could stigmatise them and reinforce resistance to widening participation interventions. Hatt and Tate report that college staff input was more likely to be forthcoming if activities to widen participation were embedded within normal teaching activities. A key factor in sustaining staff commitment to widening participation appears therefore to be the adoption of a ‘whole class’ approach to targeting.

However, this ‘cohort inclusive’ approach is open to criticism. The example of care leavers (Leonard, 2011) serves to underline the problems it may create. Care leavers have been identified as particularly poorly represented in the progression statistics. Leonard acknowledges the difficulties that stand in the way of identifying and supporting care leavers in post-compulsory education. These include the need to protect confidentiality, professional boundaries that impede communication and, not least, the stigma that may be attached to being singled out as a care leaver. However, making the same offer to all is unlikely to meet the needs of those who face greatest relative disadvantage. What Leonard identifies as lack of awareness and willingness on the part of college staff to engage with the specific needs of care leavers may perpetuate their exclusion. Leonard argues that failure to target such ‘hidden’ or ‘lost’ cohorts of disadvantaged students results in their continued exclusion, and neutralises the efforts of Government and organisations such as the Buttle Trust (which addresses the needs of children in care) to widen participation for this under-represented group. Leonard suggests that changes in Government funding priorities – particularly the removal of the Education Maintenance Allowance and its replacement with more targeted financial support for lower income students and care leavers – may concentrate the efforts of colleges in this regard.

Perhaps for the above reasons, but also because of the concern about the progression of vocational and work-based learners, much of the literature on the widening participation efforts of colleges (particularly in the context of regional Lifelong Learning Networks) has focused on targeting work- and college-based learners in specific vocational areas of study where progression rates to higher education are identified as low, for example:

- early years;
- health and social care;
- sport and tourism;
- arts and creative industries;
- land-based industries;
- construction;
- IT and engineering (particularly women in engineering).

Numerous examples of such initiatives can be found in the reports of colleges’ involvement in LLNs (for example Percy and Hudson (2007) on the creative industries; Shah (2010) on the building and construction sector; and Thomas (2011) on a range on vocational subject areas).

6.4. Curriculum initiatives to aid transition

Percy and Hudson (2007) suggest that, despite prolonged debate, parity of esteem between academic and vocational educational routes to higher education has not been achieved. The widespread view (reflected most obviously in some selecting universities’ attitude to vocational qualifications) is that Level 3 qualifications gained in colleges do not adequately prepare learners for higher education. One of the concerns of Lifelong Learning Networks was to identify changes in the vocational curriculum and teaching that could best facilitate progression to higher level study. Funds were allocated by regional Networks to support interventions and curriculum innovations to assist vocational progression. Wise and Shaw (2011) have summarised a number of these initiatives. In some vocational areas specific gaps have been identified in the curriculum that colleges might fill, to enable learners to bridge gaps from Level 3 to Level 4 or from foundation degrees to Honours level.
Bridging units, offered in colleges, have been seen as a way of smoothing the academic transition for Level 3 learners. The Open College Network South East Region (2009) and Rout et al. (2009) provide two examples of projects that have explored bridging programmes and modules. The OCN South East report describes a scoping project designed to enable colleges to develop a flexible bridging programme offering support with ‘key transferable skills’ including: research and study skills, independent learning and career planning. They discuss the qualifications frameworks that might most appropriately support the development of such programmes. In particular, they raise the issue of eligibility for funding of such programmes, highlighting some of the logistical and financial issues that may stand in the way of curriculum development for progression.

Rout et al. (2009) conducted a literature review and scoping exercise to explore the availability of bridging programmes in the Staffordshire, Stoke-on-Trent, Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin region. They list the problems identified by learners as inhibiting their progression: fear of the expectations of higher education, negative perceptions of National Vocational Qualifications, lack of ICT access and skills, cultural differences, childcare, location and costs. This tends to suggest that practical and structural constraints, rather than academic issues, may impact on students’ ability to cope with higher level study. They found that a number of institutions in their region offered bridging courses that aimed to develop research skills, critical thinking, academic writing, presentation skills and learning through reflection. However, they found that information about them was not easily accessible. Like the OCN South East Region report, Rout et al. (2009) also raise the issue of ‘fundability’ in relation to the development of bridging provision.

Aside from general study skills for higher education courses, Wise and Shaw (2011) draw attention to specific gaps that have been identified in the further education curriculum – for example in Maths for people wishing to make educational and careers progress in early years professions and sciences for students progressing from vocational courses in the animal, equine and veterinary professions.

The issue of bridging between foundation degrees and Honours-level study has also been addressed, further emphasising the divide between the vocational and academic studies, even within a higher education qualifications framework. For example, Aronstam (in Shaw et al., 2011, pp. 47-50) describes an evaluation of a bridging module that foundation degree students at the London College of Fashion are required to take in order to progress to Honours level:

… as a means of making up ‘lost’ subject content as a result of the emphasis on work placement and vocational content in the FD.

The module focused on extended academic writing (particularly in relation to the dissertation). The benefits identified from student evaluations included that it gave them a better sense of what to expect in their Honours year, as well as support in improving essay structuring, writing and referencing.

6.5. Dual-sector institutions: higher education in further education colleges

Colleges make a substantial contribution to widening participation and lifelong learning through providing routes into and through HE for younger and mature students drawn mainly from the local area. (Action on Access, 2009, p. 27)

The role of further education colleges as providers of higher education has grown considerably in the 15 years since the publication of the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997). Hatt and Tate (2009) draw on the work of Gareth Parry (2006) and colleagues (Parry et al., 2008) to trace the shift from further education colleges as ‘residual’ providers of higher education towards the development of dual-sector institutions. Dual-sector institutions are defined as institutions that are identified primarily with one sector (further education) but some of whose provision is the responsibility of another (higher education) (Parry et al., 2008). The expansion of higher education in further education (HE in FE) was part of the 1997-2010 Labour Government’s policy aim to increase and broaden the base of higher education, an aim that could not have been met simply through the expansion of traditional full-time undergraduate routes. This policy continues to be espoused under the current Coalition Government (BIS, 2011). The number of dual-sector institutions
has therefore increased considerably in recent years as has the number of programmes they offer at Level 4 (Hatt and Tate, 2009). The extent and type of HE in FE provision varies from institution to institution (Action on Access, 2009), but may range from NVQ Level 4, Higher National Certificates and Diplomas, foundation degrees to Honours degrees and postgraduate qualifications supported through franchise arrangements with universities.

A key driver for the recent expansion of higher education in further education has been the development of foundation degrees. Foundation degrees were introduced by the UK Government in 2001 as a vocationally oriented route to higher level study. Like Higher National Certificates and Diplomas, foundation degrees are Level 4 qualifications. Typically, students enrolling on a foundation degree study for two years full-time or, more commonly since the qualification is frequently combined with work, for three or four years on a part-time basis. The expectation is that those qualifying with a foundation degree would then ‘top up’ to Honours-degree level after a further period of full- or part-time study.

The Action on Access Review of FE College Widening Participation Strategic Assessments (2009) analyses how dual-sector institutions have operationalised widening participation and, in particular, how they have targeted under-represented groups. They conclude that colleges have demonstrated commitment and success in widening participation in higher education. However, their analysis also suggests that, by and large, colleges did not necessarily target those groups identified by HEFCE as under-represented (people from disadvantaged socio-economic groups who live in areas of relative deprivation; looked-after children in the care system; people with a disability or a specific learning difficulty). Rather colleges’ approach to targeting has been broadly defined and referenced to equality of opportunity in respect of gender, ethnicity and age. Not surprisingly, given the historic intake of further education colleges, the focus has been on targeting students progressing internally from Level 3 vocational programmes, local young people and work-based learners, including apprentices. However, the potential for overlap between these groups of learners and, in particular, those from lower socio-economic groups, living in areas of deprivation, is acknowledged.

The assumption that HE in FE offers a seamless progression to higher level study has been questioned. A number of issues are identified that impede the achievement of this aim (Bathmaker et al., 2008; Action on Access, 2009; Hatt and Tate, 2009):

- The fact that FE and HE are subject to different funding regimes means that there is likely to be a divide between FE and HE policy and provision, even within the same institution.
- Embedded historical divisions between FE and HE in relation to curriculum, teaching and assessment have not been eradicated by co-location.
- There is some evidence to suggest that progression routes from Level 3 to Level 4 are not always clearly indicated in information provided to learners – either by FE staff or on college websites.
- There is not always clear articulation between programmes available in FE and in HE, or between foundation degrees and top-ups to Honours degrees.
- The need for ‘bridging’ modules to enable students to make the transition from foundation degrees to top up Honours degree programmes raises the issue of ‘fit’ between college- and university-based study.
- Some university courses still retain ‘standard entry requirements’ (such as GCSE Maths), which prove a barrier to HE entry, particularly for mature learners whose school experience was not successful.

Some of these issues are illustrated in Clarke and Sharrock’s (2008) report, which attempts to map the progression routes available to students studying Early Years, Computing and Engineering who have gained higher education qualifications in a FE institution. The case studies they present demonstrate the range of ways in which people may progress, either to HE in FE or to university-based HE opportunities. They suggest that, where institutional partnerships already exist, mapping and agreeing progression opportunities is straightforward. However, they also suggest that there is considerable work to be done in developing
relationships and partnerships between institutions, which could, in turn, contribute to smoothing the path to progression for college-based learners.

7. Implications for policy and practice

Further education and sixth form colleges have been well placed to contribute to widening participation because of their historical role in offering locally accessible, vocationally focused educational opportunities to students who have not experienced success at school or who are attracted to vocational, rather than academic study. Their involvement in Aimhigher partnerships and Lifelong Learning Networks has influenced both policy and practice. Most notably, their success in developing their role as dual-sector institutions has been recognised in the policy to expand the number of HE places available in FE. Colleges’ involvement in widening participation has also impacted on practice around information advice and guidance, and curriculum development to enable progression for vocational and work-based learners. The widening participation work and research reflected in this synthesis of reports from the Archive has a number of implications for policy and practice which are outlined below. The withdrawal of government funding for Aimhigher and Lifelong Learning Networks and the encouragement of a greater competition between higher education providers (BIS, 2010) also raises the issue of the sustainability of partnerships to widen participation:

- The sustainability of partnerships developed through Aimhigher and Lifelong Learning Networks is likely to depend, to some extent, on the strength of pre-existing relations of collaboration or competition. Hatt and Tate (2009) suggest four different approaches to sustainability that may be adopted by partner institutions:
  - continuation – through finding alternative sources of funding;
  - embedding within institutional practice;
  - mainstreaming – effecting a change in practice;
  - legacy – using the knowledge gained as a basis for informing practice.

One implication of recent changes in policy will be the extent to which co-operation can be maintained in a more competitive funding environment and how institutions might be encouraged to strike a balance between co-operation and competition. Another is whether the impact of widening participation initiatives has been sufficient to embed the lessons of Aimhigher and Lifelong Learning in institutional practice.

- The ‘buy-in’ by staff at all levels of the college has been demonstrated to be important in making widening participation policy work in practice. The reports accessed for this synthesis suggest that the extent to which this has been achieved has varied. The implication of this finding is the need to consider how a whole-institution approach to widening participation can be fostered.

- The continuing professional development value of informal staff-to-staff relationships has been apparent. It assists staff in the FE and HE sectors to develop mutual understanding, which can benefit learner progression. Encouraging these relationships requires negotiating the logistics of teacher timetables and staff cover in colleges.

- Good practice has been fostered across the sector. However, a number of reports suggest variations between, and even within, colleges. This highlights the importance of continuing knowledge exchange around effective practice.

- There have been numerous successful practice initiatives around information advice and guidance. However, there appears to be a continuing need for clear frameworks to co-ordinate the efforts of tutors and specialist careers guidance workers.
• For the most disadvantaged groups in particular there needs to be more focused targeting and closer monitoring of efforts to encourage progression.

8. Gaps and areas for future research

Overall, as noted in Section 7 limited evidence was found of research on the overall impact of FE colleges’ efforts to widen participation. The cessation of funding to Aimhigher and Lifelong Learning Networks may mean that this opportunity has now passed. However, from this synthesis a number of questions emerge for future research, particularly in the light of changing policy on access to higher education and its relationship with social mobility:

• To what extent have the formal and informal collaborations built through Aimhigher and Lifelong Learning Networks been sustained in institutional policy and practice around widening participation?
• What are the social, economic and personal outcomes for learners progressing from vocational and work-based routes to higher educational opportunities?
• What are the relative merits of ‘whole class’ or individually focused approaches to encouraging progression from FE to HE, particularly for the most disadvantaged groups of young people?
• What impact do bridging programmes and modules have on the retention and success of learners, from Level 3 to Level 4 and from foundation degrees to Honours-level study?

9. References


Open College Network South East Region (2009) Progression to higher education: a scoping project for a bridging course to support learner progression from vocational study and training to higher level study. OCN South East Region/Kent and Medway Lifelong Learning Network. Available from: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/LN/KMLLN_Bridging_course_scoping_project. [Accessed 17 November 2012].


