



National Report Overview on Access and Progression in the UK

1. Research-practice dialogue

Researchers and practitioners in University Lifelong Learning Departments (ULLL) are at the forefront in acting to bridge the gaps between research, policy and practice in access and progression. This is because of their involvement in research that demonstrated the unequal access to universities experienced by many adults and their practical understanding of many adults' desires to move from more informal learning into accredited learning.

The strategy for promoting access and progression in terms of both research and its practical implementation is generally located in the ULLL departments of universities. Dialogue between research and practice takes place through: identifying the issue; researching possible solutions; then implementing contextually appropriate practical solutions. Three broad types of solutions have been identified: outreach and pre-entry development courses; special entry qualifications; recognizing prior learning. ULLL departments have, for example, developed Wider Access Networks as they identified the need for preparation for adults before they began their courses as both a practical problem and an issue identified by research on adults' experience in university. ULLL have also been advocates for adult participation so these departments have developed a collective understanding of both what the problem of enabling access and progression is, and how it might be alleviated. This understanding led to the development of special entry qualifications that draw on adults' prior experience. A final example is Recognising Prior Learning (RPL) that was developed because research showed that both adults and their employers were concerned about how work-based experience could be made to count.

2. University lifelong learning (ULLL)

The Universities Association for Lifelong Learning promotes the lifelong learning interests of the UK higher education sector. It represents the interests of both the UK and of the four nations: England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. UALL acts as a forum for the exchange of ideas and good practice, lifelong learning research, and as a UK-wide consultative body for the discussion and formulation of policy (<http://www.uall.ac.uk/aboutuall.html>). A key strength of the Association is the linking of strategy to practice through an extensive array of organised networks. The networks enable staff of member institutions to engage directly in the Association, and to benefit from sharing experience and ideas with fellow practitioners across the UK.

UALL has a broad definition of lifelong learning - as personal and community as well as vocational development – and actively promotes this in the policy debate, because it is clear that 'lifelong learning' has often been interpreted in a narrowly vocational sense as training for economic gain.

There is a separate Scottish Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (SUALL) that provides a forum for the development and dissemination of good practice and excellence in continuing education, lifelong learning, training and CPD within Scotland's universities; represents continuing education within HE and to funding authorities; responds to



government papers and other public documents; facilitates communication, liaison and collaboration with other bodies and organisations in the field; conducts and disseminates research into education throughout life. To provide focus within SUALL, active practitioners contribute to Network Groups focusing on, for example, Widening Participation, Research, Management and administration. The work of SUALL's members ensures that Universities remain key providers of lifelong learning, continuing education and training.

3. The UK and Scottish context

Embedding access and progression is a core strategic issue for all UK higher education institutions. The HE sector is expected to develop and deliver these policies in ways that are consistent with their own mission so that the strategy 'will be sustainable because it will be embedded in HEIs' policy and practice, becoming part of the norm for the sector' (HEFCE, 2011). Because there are large discrepancies in the take-up of higher education opportunities between different social groups action to change this is particularly concerned with ensuring equality of opportunity for disabled students, mature students and minority ethnic groups. Policies throughout the UK focus on raising aspirations and educational attainment among people from under-represented communities to prepare them for higher education, ensure success on their programme of study, improve their employment prospects and provide opportunities to return to learning throughout their lives.

The four countries of the UK now have different degrees of devolution of policies in relation to Higher Education with Scotland as the most distinctive. Even before devolution in 1999, Scotland had its own curriculum framework and qualifications system, with different lengths of compulsory education, different school examination systems and longer degree courses. Following devolution the Scottish Parliament gained legislative authority for the entire education system. Because of this distinctiveness, the difficulty of reporting on all four countries and because our institution is in Scotland many aspects of this report will focus on the Scottish system.

4. Methodology

This report is based on a review of a range of data on widening access and promoting progression for mature students in universities. Data on access to HE in the UK, Scotland and Europe is derived from Eurostat and HIS sources that were mainly compiled as part of other projects. Data on the policy overview were taken from documents published by the Scottish Government and the Scottish Funding Council. Data on the implementation of access and progression opportunities were derived from the research literature and from a range of university and public body web sites. Lyn Tett and Rob Mark of the University of Strathclyde have prepared the overview.



5. Facts and figures on access to the university sector in the UK, Scotland and Europe

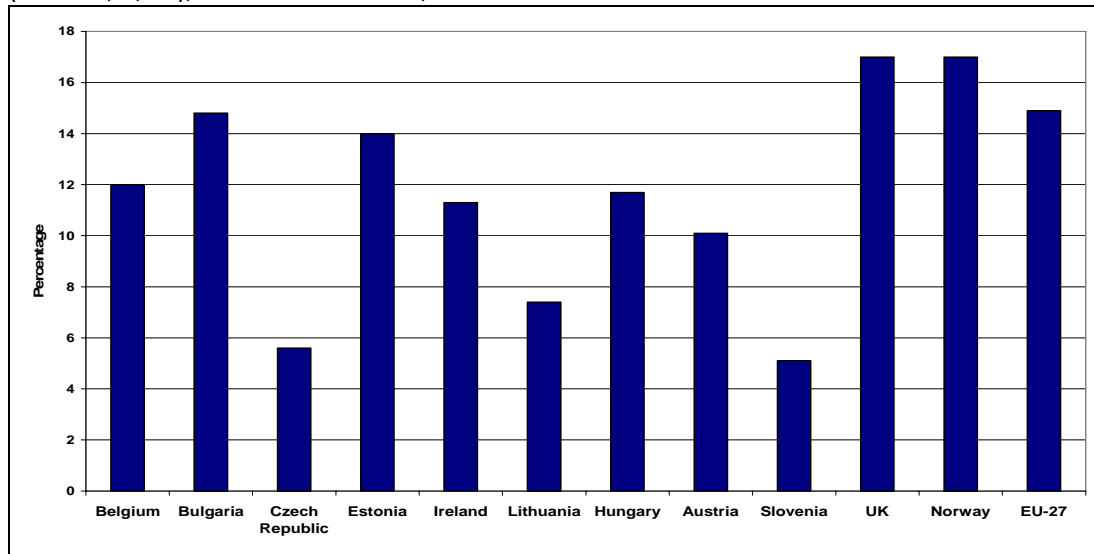
Defining access and progression

Access is broadly defined as all those activities undertaken by higher education institutions (HEIs) to widen access for those from under-represented and disadvantaged groups. It also refers to the measures to support learners when in HE so that they are able to complete their qualifications. As the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) points out: 'access to learning is important because it is fundamental to creating a fairer and more prosperous society, but it also has the capacity to improve individual well-being, confidence, health and the lifetime earnings of individuals' (SFC, 2011).

Data on access to Higher Education

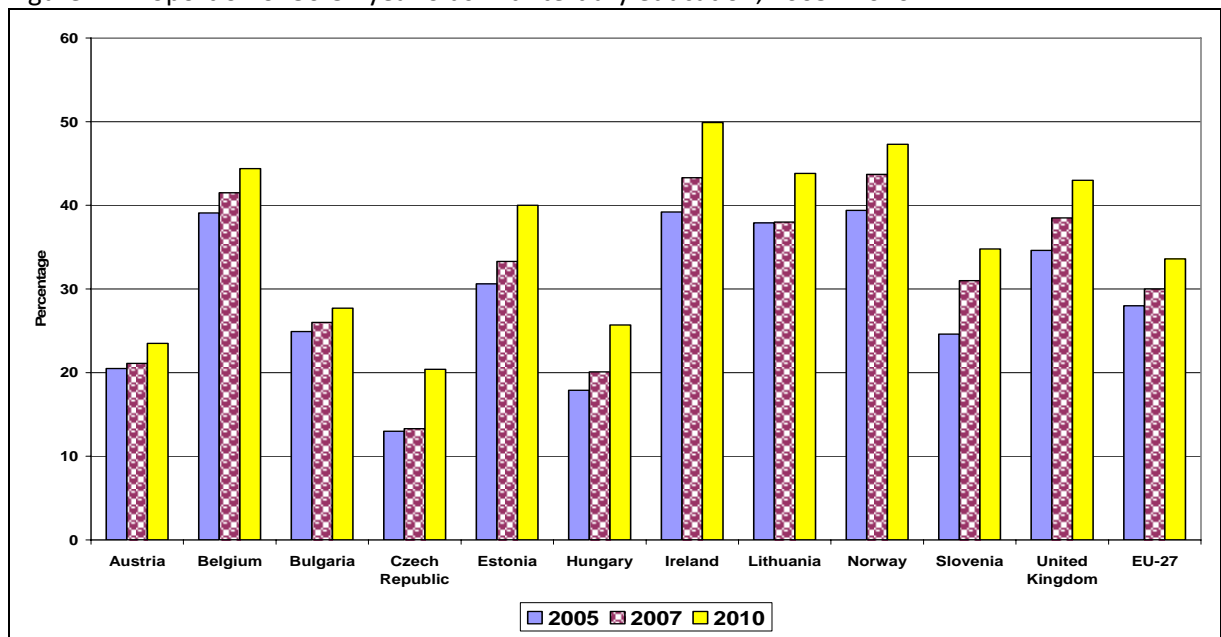
Whilst the UK has a relatively well-qualified population, in comparison with Europe, the UK overall has a high proportion of school leavers with only lower secondary education (figure 1) but also a relatively high proportion, above the EU average, of the population educated to degree level (figure 2). This indicates a bipolar distribution of skills in the workforce. There are a cluster of workers that have either high or low level of skills and qualifications. A smaller group or workers in the middle has intermediate level qualifications (figures compiled by Weedon et al, 2011).

Figure 1: Proportion of population of 18-24 year olds with at most lower secondary level (ISCED 1, 2, 3c), LLL 2010 countries, 2008



Source: Eurostat, Eurostat Yearbook 2010, Eurostat, 2010

Figure 2: Proportion of 30-34 year olds with tertiary education, 2005 - 2010



Source:

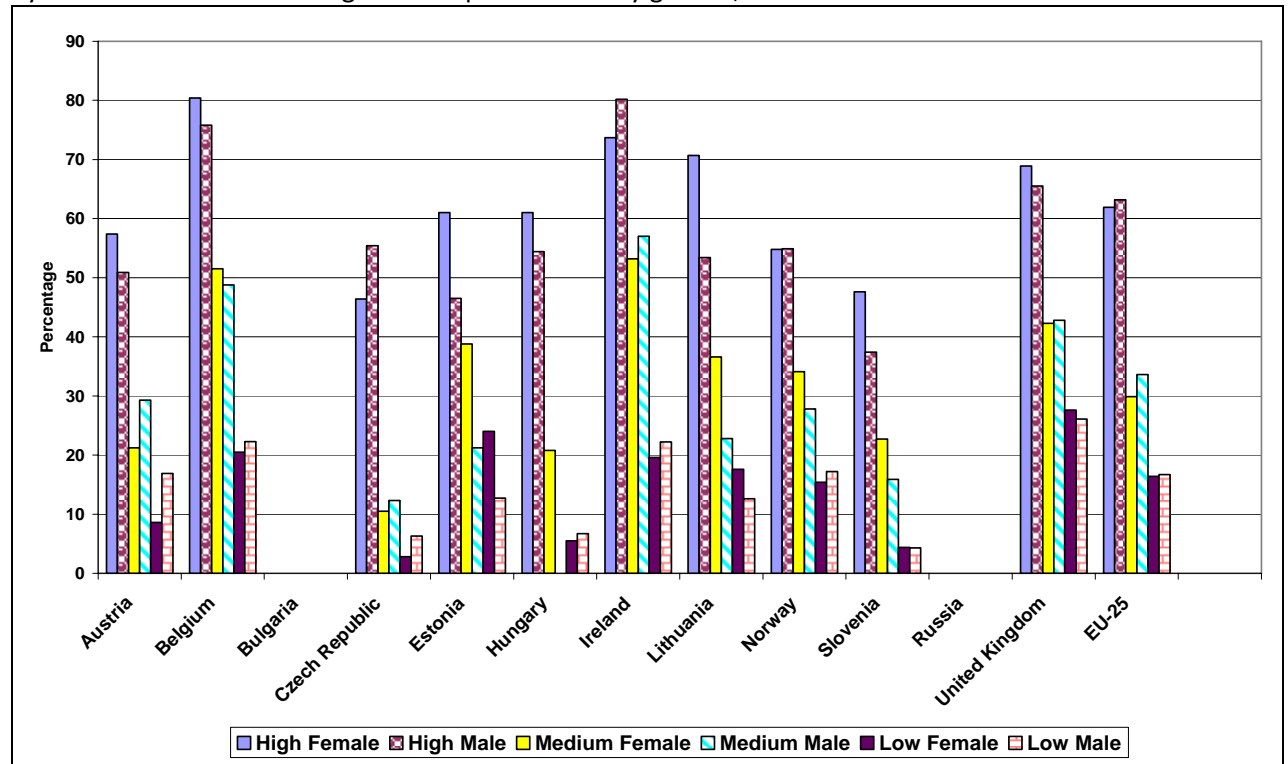
http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/europe_2020_indicators/headline_indicators

These data suggest that inequalities occur at an early stage with a relatively large proportion of young people leaving school with low qualifications, compared to other European countries. These inequalities persist throughout an individual's lifetime as those with already high qualifications generally have greater access to learning as the National Adult Learning Survey (NALS) 2005 Scotland Report (Ormston, et al, 2007) shows. The survey found that 85% of those with SVQ level 5 (ISCED level 5) had taken part in taught learning in the 3 years preceding the survey. Of those with no qualifications (ISCED level 1-2) only 23%

had taken part in taught learning. This survey also showed that 82% of those with parents who had a degree qualification were likely to engage in taught learning compared with only 63% of those whose parents left school at 16. These inequalities are reflected in universities where only 15% of Scottish domiciled entrants to higher education in the UK come from the 20% most deprived areas; and mature students from the most deprived areas continue to be less likely to enter universities than mature students from less deprived areas (Scottish Government, 2011). In terms of progression Scotland continues to have the second highest non-continuation rate for full-time first degree entrants in the UK and students from the most deprived areas remain the most likely to drop-out (SFC, 2011)

These socio-economic differences in participation are reflected across Europe as Figure 3 demonstrates using parental level of education as a proxy measure of social class differences since those with higher education qualifications are likely to work in professional and managerial occupations and to have higher incomes (figures compiled by Weedon and Riddell, forthcoming). As can be seen whilst there has been great success in addressing women's under-representation in higher education, the social class gap remains firmly in place.

Figure 3: Percentage of those aged 25+ who have completed tertiary education (ISCED 5-6) by level of educational background of parents and by gender, 2005



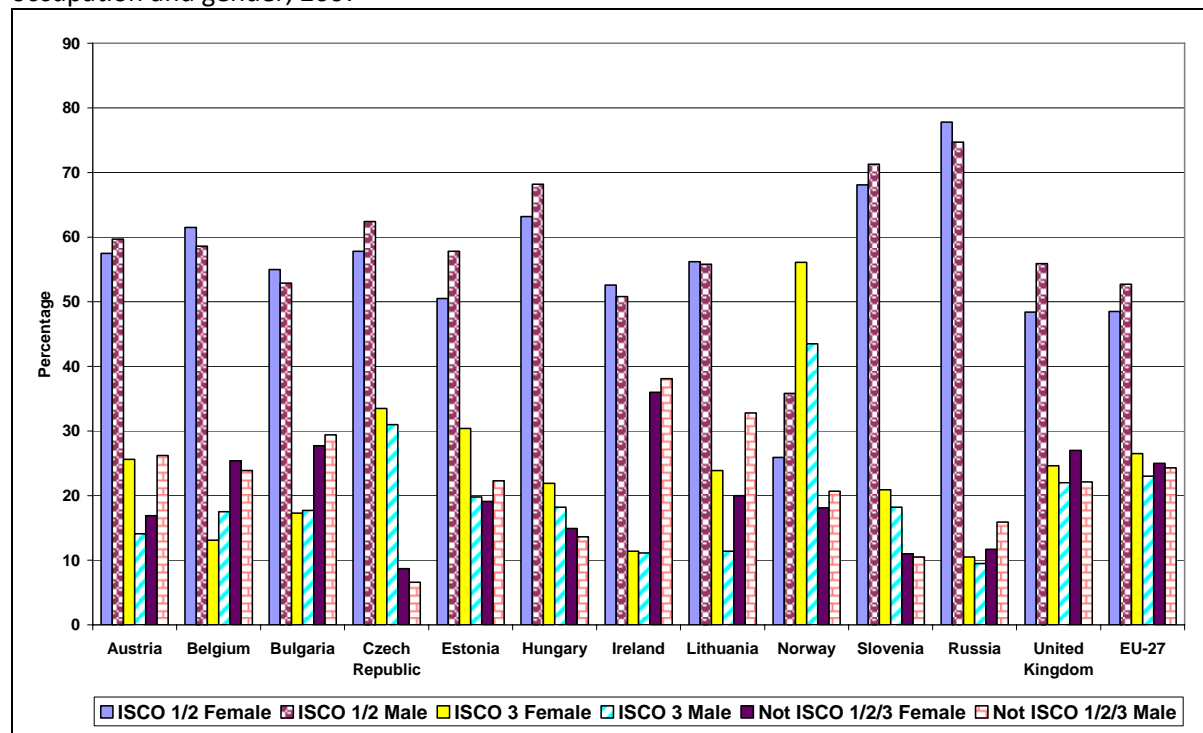
Source: Eurostat, EU-SILC in European Communities and HIS, Hochschul-Informationssystem GmbH, 2009

The association between parents' and children's level of education is particularly marked in the old member states, where participation rates have traditionally been higher. Belgium and Ireland appear to have particularly strong links between parents' and children's educational attainment. In all countries, children from families with low educational attainment are much less likely to achieve higher education qualifications. This pattern is

particularly marked in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia, where only around 5% of those whose parents have low educational attainment achieve a tertiary level qualification, compared with the UK, where 30% of those whose parents have low educational attainment achieve a higher level qualification.

There is an equally strong association between having higher qualifications and employment as is illustrated by figure 4.

Figure 4: Percentage of people with tertiary level education aged 25-34 by level of occupation and gender, 2007



Source: Eurostat, EU-LFS in European Communities and HIS, Hochschul-Informations-System GmbH, 2009

Note: ISCO = International Standard Classification of Occupation

ISCO 1 and 2 refers to legislators, senior officials, managers and professionals; ISCO 3 includes technicians and associate professionals.

As can be seen in almost all countries, at least half of those with tertiary level education work in professional and managerial occupations. This means that the value of a tertiary level qualification is clear in relation to an individual's ability to obtain employment. On the other hand across Europe, less than half of those with lower qualifications are in work, compared with more than 80% of those with graduate level qualifications (Weedon and Riddell, forthcoming).

These data illustrate the importance of developing access to higher education for people that have experienced socio-economic disadvantage and ensuring their progression whilst they are there. The next section discusses the policy and legal context for developing flexible entry routes to higher education and helping participants to make progress.



6. Policy and legal context

Scotland has a large university sector comprising 19 institutions and, in 2009-10, there were 237,765 students. Universities receive core funding from the Scottish Government but the overall dependency on core funding from the state varies from institution to institution, with the highest being 71% for University of the West of Scotland and the lowest being 27% for St Andrews (Scottish Government, 2011). These differences are mainly due to the ability to gain income from international students, research and endowments.

The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) is the body responsible for carrying out the Scottish Government's policy in relation to access and progression through its strategy for widening participation. The main aims of this strategy are to increase the numbers of students from the most deprived areas progressing on to degree programmes and to increase articulation from those with qualifications other than those gained at school into HE. Progress on these aims is reported on annually through the document *Measures of Success for Learning for All* (SFC, 2011). This document monitors access to, and retention in, higher education using a basket of measures. It provides statistical data in order to identify trends and both monitors and influences a collective response from all the institutions in Scotland to the widening access challenge.

The Scottish Government has recently (September 2011) issued a consultation document that argues that Post-16 education in Scotland must be: *Sustainable: Open to all: Flexible: Learner-centred: Focussed on jobs and growth: Diverse: Excellent: International: Well-led* (2011, paragraph 21). The document points out that the current economic situation and difficult financial climate requires adjustments to expenditure and expects to achieve this by reforming and refocusing the system through placing more 'weight on young people' (paragraph 2). This may have implications for future policy in relation to measures to facilitate the participation of older learners through the lifelong learning strategies that promote social inclusion.

The other policy of relevance is the lifelong learning strategy *Skills for Scotland: a lifelong learning skills strategy* (Scottish Government, 2007). As the title indicates, it has a strong emphasis on skills development and employability and aims to provide a cohesive system for the provision of skills across the lifespan. It recognises the need to develop 'strong mechanisms for clearly articulating the skills the employers need now and what they may require in the future and we need providers who can listen and who have the capacity to deliver' (Scottish Government, 2007: 30). This strategy was updated in 2010 (Scottish Government, 2010) and continues the emphasis on the need to develop skills in the workforce and identifies the importance of raising the ambitions of firms, encouraging employee engagement and developing workplace cultures that enable people to develop and best use their skills (2010: 41).

The importance of this policy for access and progression is that it encourages both employees and employers to find ways of using and developing their skills in employment and working with the university sector to accredit these existing skills. One way in which this can be done is through giving students 'advanced standing' and the SFC (2011) reported that in 2009-10 the total number of Scottish-domiciled students entering a full-time first-



degree course into the second or third year with advanced standing (i.e. articulating) increased across Scotland.

Another aspect of the development and accreditation of experience is the recognition of prior learning (RPL). The legal framework through which this is done is the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF). The SCQF partnership promotes lifelong learning through assisting '*people of all ages and circumstances to access appropriate education and training over their lifetime to fulfil their personal, social and economic potential*' (SCQF, <http://www.scqf.org.uk/The%20Framework/>). The Framework enables the recognition of different types of learning in a wide range of settings - for example, learning in the workplace or in the community - and enables such learning to be allocated to the appropriate level and credit points on the Framework. The Framework was developed as part of the 'Bologna Process' in higher education and the framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland is compatible with the framework for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

In summary the policy and legal context in Scotland provides opportunities for developing access and progression in lifelong learning through the encouragement of initiatives that promote fairer access for adults. Such opportunities are particularly targeted at those living in disadvantaged areas and those that do not have the standard entry qualifications. Once adults have entered universities these policies are also designed to ensure their successful progression.

7. Implementation of access and progression opportunities in the UK

There are three main ways in which access to HE, and progression once enrolled, can be facilitated – outreach and pre-entry development courses; special entry qualifications; recognizing prior learning. In this section why these different approaches have been taken and examples of how they operate will be given.

Outreach and pre-entry development

People who have found school a negative experience and live in communities where few have participated in post-compulsory education are unlikely to see participation in HE as a possibility for them (Reay et al, 2010). This means that universities need to engage with people in their communities and demonstrate that university can be for them. Many ULLL departments have worked closely with particular communities or groups to encourage them to participate through providing effective information, advice and guidance (IAG) on what opportunities are available and on the specific application process. In addition taster courses provided in communities, and targeted open days have been found to be successful in encouraging participation.

Another aspect of pre-entry development involves preparing people with the study skills that they will require that will enable them to engage fully with university level study. Special preparatory courses for adults wishing to go to university are provided under the auspices of the Scottish Widening Access Programme (SWAP). This early preparation has been shown to promote later progression once people are in the university.



An example of this kind of provision is the pre-entry access course to Strathclyde University. This one year evening programme is focused on those who completed school education and who have gained some further life or work experience, who could benefit for taking a higher education degree programme, but who do not have the general entry requirements of the university, or who have been away from study for some time. It aims to equip adult students with the necessary skills for undergraduate study and to familiarize them with what a university has to offer. Participants study an Arts module (e.g. English, History, Modern Languages) and one Social Sciences module (e.g. Politics, Psychology, Sociology, Geography), as well as one further module. Students can apply for help with costs through a Scottish Government individual learning account award.

Special Entry qualifications

Research shows (e.g. Cree et al, 2006) that, to a very large extent, inequalities in entry to higher education can be explained by differences in achievement of entry qualifications gained in school. The lower an individual's socio-economic status the more likely they are to leave school with few or no academic qualifications. This shows that an important means of facilitating access is by having special entry qualifications for such students. In some cases this might mean waiving entry qualifications altogether and instead accrediting experience from life or work especially in the vocational areas of child-care, social work and community education. In these professions life experience derived from living in a disadvantaged area and working within the community on a voluntary basis is seen as providing very important experiential knowledge that is as useful as having academic qualifications in identifying a person's suitability for the profession (e.g. Tett, 2000). Once people have entered the university additional support is often necessary to enable them to manage the new environment.

An example of provision is the Bachelor of Arts in Community Development (BACD) programme offered by the University of Glasgow. People living in particularly disadvantaged communities who have experience of working in their community on a voluntary or paid basis can enter the programme without any educational qualifications. This is because their experience of community work is deemed to be the equivalent of academic qualifications. Students undertake a special study skills course at the start of their programme and have the support of dedicated tutors to help them during the whole programme. Work experience forms a large part of the programme where students need to demonstrate their skills, knowledge and understanding of the communities in which they live and work. The BACD has a very high retention rate that is mostly due to the continuing support offered to students.

Recognizing prior learning (RPL)

The RPL process enables the recognition of previous learning that has taken place in informal, formal or non-formal contexts in order to gain credit or exemption for qualifications. This encourages a wider concept of learning that enables people to go beyond formal learning and rewards wider experience. RPL can help universities create more flexible learning paths, ranging from offering partial exemptions through to individual learning routes and so can break down barriers and expand the horizons of learners and institutions alike. Universities have worked on the development of materials to support learners through the formative stages of demonstrating their prior learning as they grow in confidence, recognise the skills and knowledge they have and develop capacity to think and



write reflectively. In Scotland, the existence of a comprehensive lifelong learning framework (the SCQF described above), in which all mainstream learning is expressed in terms of learning outcomes and carries credits, makes it much easier to make fair comparisons of learning from different contexts. Many of the projects in Scotland have strong elements of training and support for academic staff as a key means of ensuring consistency and high standards. Many also involve collaborative approaches with a range of partners and stakeholders that is helpful both in ensuring the success of the RPL itself but also the acceptance of the approach and results by stakeholders.

One example of this kind of access is the project at the University of the West of Scotland (UWS) that uses interactive workshops to enable participants to reflect on their significant learning and then link this to specific learning outcomes. Learning outcomes are indicators of what is expected of the student designed to show clear links between learning and assessment and engage students in the learning process. Students can evidence learning outcomes through written reports, a portfolio of evidence, presentations or taking an assessment. Once this evidence is assessed then students are given credits towards specific qualifications. For example the BA Management Bridging Programme enables students with experience to claim 240 credit points that means they only need to complete the remaining 120 to gain the qualification.

8. Conclusion

This report has demonstrated the importance of developing access to higher education for people that have experienced socio-economic disadvantage and ensuring progression whilst they are there. It has argued that the policy and legal context in the UK and Scotland provides a variety of opportunities for developing access and progression through the encouragement of initiatives that promote fairer access for adults.

Access and progression opportunities are promoted in three main ways: through outreach and pre-entry development courses; special entry qualifications; recognizing prior learning. The research that led to these different approaches has been outlined and the practical responses have been illustrated. Finally the practical links between ULLL research and practice have been delineated.



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