

RANLHE: The Challenge of Access, Retention and Drop-out in higher education in Europe: the experience of non-traditional students, Conference 7-8 April, 2011

Authors: Dr Karla H. Benske, Ms Julie Brown and Ms Ruth Whittaker

Institution etc: Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning, Glasgow Caledonian University, MS103/4, City Campus, Cowcaddens Road, Glasgow, G4 0BA

Themes: *Institutional and cultural contexts and perspectives; Access; Retention; Drop-out*

Moving Forward towards a Transformative Model of Widening Participation

1. Introduction

The Moving Forward Initiative is a university-wide strategic approach to enhancing the first-year student experience and to improving transition, progression and retention. Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) has a high percentage of students from non-traditional, low-participation backgrounds, often coming into university as direct entrants onto levels two and three (of a four-level Scottish undergraduate degree). GCU has a long commitment to widening participation and to meeting the needs of its diverse student body. Moving Forward centres on partnership working (Krause 2006; Whittaker, 2008) across the whole of the university with the aim to support a transformational approach to Widening Participation and the development of a transition pedagogy (Kift, 2009). The University's new Widening Participation Strategy was informed by Moving Forward, which is now tasked with supporting its implementation, drawing on its experiences in partnership working and taking advantage of its networks and contacts that have been developed in the past.

The key challenge is engaging and supporting staff with turning policy into practice. Moving Forward adopted a two-tier approach (top-down and bottom-up) to motivate staff and students to participate in the processes of change and to support an all-encompassing strategy combining student support, learning, teaching, assessment, and employability to ensure that the University's model of Widening Participation is transformative and all-inclusive so that an increasingly diverse student population can become successful graduates.

The top-down approach is based on formal partnership agreements with academic schools, Learner Support and the Students' Association. Their aim is to maintain and enhance partnership working and to support staff with the implementation of the Widening Participation Strategy in conjunction with other relevant policies. They allow our partners to

identify key priority areas, ways of communication, and participation in School activities together with Moving Forward who provide expert advice and support on Widening Participation and ways of addressing transition, progression and retention issues. Additionally, Moving Forward is funding Development Projects in each of the academic schools with a focus on transferability across the institution. Hence, they offer a sustainable approach to enhancing the student experience.

Our Mini Communities of Practice offer a bottom-up opportunity for members of staff and students to engage with each other across the University, provide a vehicle for development work and the sharing of practice. They cover a wide range of topics, such as feedback - the student perspective, developing the independent learner, supporting induction and engagement with secondary schools and colleges.

The paper will chart the development of Moving Forward, its activities, interim evaluation outcomes, key achievements, the challenges of sustaining staff and student engagement, and its role in supporting the University's Widening Participation Strategy.

2. The GCU Context and the Conceptualisation of Moving Forward

Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) has a large number of students from non-traditional, low-participation backgrounds often coming from college into university as direct entrants onto levels two and three (of a four-level Scottish undergraduate degree):

1. 37% of students were from disadvantaged backgrounds, significantly over the Scottish average of 28% and the UK average of 32% (Scottish Government, 2010)
2. Non-continuation was 10.5%
3. 26% articulated/progressed from college into full-time undergraduate programmes with a Higher National Certificate (HNC) at Level 2 or a Higher National Diploma (HND) at Level 3
4. 74% of all full-time undergraduate students entering Levels 2 and 3 had an HNC or HND as their highest qualification
5. 46% of our students are 'first in family'
6. 35% were over 21
7. 6.5% declared a disability.

Such diversity amongst students requires a strategy of enhancing transition support and the learning experience for all students. While GCU, like other post-1992 universities, offers a wide range of student support, such as Academic Development Tutors, Summer School, Effective Learning Service, Peer Support, and is viewed by students as friendly and open, the

progression and retention figures are still disappointingly low (Thomas 2002, 2005). Against this background, the Moving Forward initiative was established, representing a coordinated, institutional strategy for transition and progression and evidence-based practice, based on a partnership approach, to improve progression and retention rates, and to enhance the student experience. This development forms the basis of the GCU's Strategic Plan for the Scottish Funding Council's (SFC) Widening Access and Retention Premium (WARP) allocation.

The purpose of the WARP allocation is to support institutions in improving the experience for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, so that these learners are more likely to complete their courses successfully. The Scottish Funding Council expects all WARP recipients to develop and apply appropriate strategies for improving retention to monitor trends in student retention; and to take appropriate action to address weaknesses in retention.

Possible impact indicators in relation to progression and retention are:

- Student outcomes: continuation/achievement
- Development/implementation of evidence-based approach to addressing progression and retention at central or school level
- Gathering and analysis of evidence to ensure development of appropriate solutions/ sharing of this data with partners (across university /with schools or colleges)
- Development/implementation/evaluation of effective transition support processes: pre and post-entry support
- Development/implementation of appropriate curricula and learning, teaching, assessment processes that address transition support and enhance student engagement
- Development/implementation of peer support processes
- Development of flexible provision – entry, pace, place, mode – to facilitate participation and progression

Moving Forward supports the University's work towards meeting the conditions for the WARP allocation and is informed by the work of the First Year Experience Quality Enhancement Theme in Scotland, particularly the Transition project (Whittaker, 2008), Krause's (2005 & 2006) work on student engagement, Kift's (2009) work on transition pedagogy, the outcomes and findings of the STAR project (Cook et. al, 2005). Moving Forward has developed the GCU Transition and Progression Framework (GCU TPF) in conjunction with the Learning, Teaching, and Assessment Strategy (LTAS) and other relevant university policies. It supports its implementation, evaluation and provides greater support for staff in developing and implementing strategies to address issues associated with transition and progression.

3. The Partnership Approach and Staff Engagement

Successful transition into university underpins successful progression and is linked to student engagement in both academic and social terms. This is facilitated not only through student support processes, but through approaches to learning, teaching and assessment. In relation to college entrants, a closer fit between the curriculum content of HN qualifications and degree programmes is required as well as approaches that support academic and social transition to university. Reviewing curriculum delivery models as well as learning, teaching and assessment processes is necessary. 'Moving forward' has provided an opportunity for the University to think critically and creatively about the way in which it supports transition and progression.

The university-wide partnership approach as the key mechanism for developing a coordinated, institutional strategy and engaging staff reflects good practice within the HE sector both nationally (Strathclyde University 2006, UHIMI: Campbell, 2006, 2007) as well as internationally (Harvey et al., 2006 Krause, 2006, 2007, QAA, 2005, Whittaker, 2008). The initiative has secured a high level of staff and student engagement via a continuous consultation with all its stakeholders.

The development of the GCU TPF was based on discussions with staff within all academic schools and a wide range of support departments, who were asked to discuss the following questions:

- What are the issues associated with progression and engagement within your programmes?
- What strategies are you currently using to address these issues?
- In what ways would you like to improve transition and progression support?
- What examples of practice/case studies could be included in the Framework resource from your School/Department?

Parallel to the staff consultation sessions, student focus groups were held to discuss issues in relation to transition and progression. Together with the outcomes of student surveys (NSS and New2GCU, ReviewGCU) they formed the basis for the student input into the development of the Framework.

All outcomes were then matched against the principles of effective transition support (Whittaker, 2008), reflective questions and suggestions/action plans to form the GCU TPF. The Framework underwent an iterative process whereby all participants were asked to provide feedback and comments before the document went through the ratification process.

Overall, the GCU TPF integrates and supports all activities linked to supporting student transition and progression within the schools and at central level. It highlights strategies and

principles for effective transition support including pre entry guidance and support; developing a sense of belonging at GCU; a longitudinal process of induction; focus on enhancement; effective tracking and monitoring and proactive follow up; learning, teaching assessment strategies, including embedding support; developing independent learners, student engagement and early formative assessment with meaningful feedback. The action plans that are developed on the basis of the Framework are linked to the implementation of the GCU Learning, Teaching, and Assessment Strategy (LTAS) and it continues to be developed as a central resource for staff and students.

The development of the GCU TPF shows that partnership approaches can work extremely well. However, there are limitations: a high number of staff from all levels have been involved during consultation and framework development, but a majority of staff still needs to be convinced and motivated to apply these new developments to their daily routine. The challenge is to ensure a continued engagement beyond the consultation and development phase (Barrie, 2009). One of the strategies that Moving Forward applied was the introduction of six so-called 'Mini Communities of Practice' (Mini CoPs) at the launch event for the GCU TPF. These were based on the six key areas for transition and progression support that were identified throughout the consultation process:

- Learning, Teaching, Assessment and Feedback
- Student Empowerment
- Preparation and Induction
- Peer Support and Mentoring
- Liaison with Schools and Colleges
- Marketing and Communication

The Mini CoPs have provided a platform for staff to engage with new developments in research and practical development (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder 2002). They offer opportunities for cross-institutional and inter-institutional collaboration and, thus, represent a model for turning policy into practice. However, in relation to the developmental nature of the Mini CoPs, facilitation remains crucial, highlighting the fact that these are not Communities of Practice in the classical sense (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). Nevertheless, enabling small groups of interested members of staff from different disciplines to discuss, reflect on, and trial parts of the Framework, can bridge the gap between policy and practice. It encourages members of staff to engage in scholarly activity and enables communication, relationship building and sharing of practice. Such an approach is essential particularly in relation to curriculum development and programme delivery (Barrie, 2009; Kift, 2009; Krause, 2005). Nonetheless, university bureaucracy and committee structures have to be followed and any implementation process requires sufficient time allowances.

Therefore, the challenge is nurturing and sustaining support for university-wide initiatives long term (Gorard & Smith, 2006).

4. Building on the interim evaluation outcomes: a two-tier approach to turning policy into practice

During the course of the summer 2009, an interim evaluation was undertaken in order to evaluate Moving Forward's impact and to define a way forward towards implementing the Framework. The main tools for data collection were a web-based survey, sent to 400 members of the overall Moving Forward Community of Practice; short evaluation pro-formas handed out after events and Mini CoP meetings, and 21 in-depth interviews with significant representatives across the University, such as School Deans, Heads of Learning and Teaching Quality, Directors of Support Departments, Academic Development Tutors, and the Executives of the Students' Association. Mixing tools in this way served to enhance the validity of the evaluation findings and ensure both breadth and depth of coverage. There was a 23% response rate to the web-based survey and those who completed the survey represent a range of staff from across the university and beyond, with 50.5% from academic schools, 25.3% from support departments, 5.5% from colleges, 3.3% from the Students' Association and 15.4 % from other areas.

The evaluation highlighted a number of things:

- Moving Forward's partnership approach was exceptionally positive with more than 70% of respondents aware of the Moving Forward partnership approach and agreement that it is important to listen to staff and students:

"it's a great way to engage as many members of staff [sic] and students as possible."

"From the perspective of the Students' Association, this project has been an important part of how we look to obtain feedback from Class Representatives on transitional issues and other areas through informing the type of discussions held and questions asked of students."

"Very positive, particularly in regard to the partnership approach [sic] that has been developed with colleges as well as staff within GCU, and in the development of the themed mini-Communities of Practice."

- 67% of respondents to the web-based survey find the Framework useful/very useful. Feedback on the Framework collected through evaluation pro-formas employed at key stages/events shows over 80% find it useful or very useful:

“It provides guidance and allows schools, departmentns [sic] and support services to pick and choose which area they want to tackle. it's also very practically oriented and backed-up well by examples of practice.”

“A comprehensive set of strategies, complemented by a clear focus on how these might best be translated into action.”

“It's a useful way to consider exemplars of current good practice and hence potential areas for collaboration.”

- Feedback on the Mini CoPs is exceptionally positive, providing strong evidence that Moving Forward has been successful in enabling the sharing of practice and cross-institutional communication and discussion. Over 70% of survey respondents view them positively:

“it's been a great way of finding out what other people do and also to establish new contacts and networks across the university and with colleges.”

“The Moving Forward mini-Communities of Practice represent a sustained approach to staff development across the university and college sectors, and have the potential to make a significant contribution to an enhanced understanding of learner progression and transition between the sectors.”

- However, a strong view was expressed that the schools need to be more actively involved and collaborate more closely with Moving Forward in order to ascertain the sustainability of the partnership approach, allowing the schools to take ownership, and to turn policy into practice, i.e. to implement the GCU TPF.

The outcomes of the interim evaluation highlight the fact that, although Moving Forward is successful in engaging staff and students through its Mini CoPs, the implementation of the Framework at school level has yet to be achieved across the university as a whole. Subsequently, the Moving Forward Steering Group decided to apply a two-tier approach of supporting the implementation of the GCU TPF: continuing the Mini CoPs (bottom-up), whilst also developing, negotiating and signing formal Partnership Agreements with the academic schools and Learner Support (top-down).

4. 1. Bottom-up: Moving Forward Mini Communities of Practice

The Mini CoPs offer a bottom-up opportunity for members of staff and students to engage with each other across the University, provide a vehicle for development work and enhance the sharing of practice. They have been running since 2009, meeting approximately every 12 weeks and have covered a wide range of topics, from ‘defining the independent learner’, an overview of the New2GCU initiative, discussions surrounding mechanisms for better internal

communication, peer-assisted study support, 'Routes for All', the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence, to College University Subject Partnerships (CUSPs) for instance. The attendance at meetings varies. The first round of meetings saw 14-35 persons attend, while there were 9-22 persons at the latest round of Mini CoPs. After running for nearly two years and against the background of a significant restructure of the University this is still a very good turn out, in line with the positive feedback that the Mini CoPs have received so far. The fact that different people from the same academic schools and support departments attend the meetings also hints towards a wider engagement with staff, attracting new members of staff to attend and taking ideas, examples of practice, and discussions back to their school/programme.

Apart from monitoring the attendance at the Mini CoP meetings, pro-formas and 'post-it' exercises are used as part of a continuous evaluation, for instance, asking participants:

1. Why do they come to the meetings?
2. What do they want to get out of the meetings?
3. What do they think the next steps should be?

Unsurprisingly, the majority of responses to the last two questions are action oriented, with requests for concrete outcomes, like the production of guidance on feedback and/or the independent learner. The exercise also resulted in MF adapting to the needs of the participants and recently altering the format of the Mini CoPs to focus more on themed approaches. Participants at all meetings have been enthusiastic and responsive. The latest Mini CoP meetings were held in March 2011, were well supported and looked at induction, the part-time student experience and feedback guidance for students and staff.

4. 2. Top Down: Partnership Agreements

The Moving Forward partnership agreements are a direct result of the interim evaluation, in which members of the senior management have asked for a more pro-active involvement of Moving Forward with the academic schools and Learner support during semi-structured interviews. Partnership agreements allow the partners to identify key priority areas, ways of communication, and participation in School activities together with Moving Forward and offer a sustainable approach to enhancing the student experience. A template for the partnership agreements was devised with the help two academic schools, outlining a range of possible activities, areas of responsibilities for Moving Forward and the academic school/Learner Support and a table comprising the named activity, its relation to the GCU TPF and a timeline for the negotiated key activities. This template was subsequently approved by the GCU Strategic Implementation Group (SIG). Moving Forward have since negotiated the partnership agreements with all academic schools and Learner support, mainly

meeting with the School Deans and Heads of Learning, Teaching and Quality. So far, four agreements have been signed and a range of activities, such as long-thin induction workshops for staff, reviewing first-year assessment, developing a school-based online programme to support re-sits, and developing a school-based employability strategy are underway. However, some academic schools have been reluctant to sign the partnership agreements, the reason for which includes the fact that GCU is currently undergoing restructuring and that several key members of academic staff have left the University.

In addition to its partnership agreements and the Mini CoPs, Moving Forward offered some additional funding to motivate staff and students to become engaged in supporting transition into and through the university. Currently, there are seven projects funded within the academic schools, Learner Support and the Students' Association and two projects funded through the Mini CoPs:

- School of Health: Blogging placement - the development of reusable learning objects for transition and induction to the placement environment
- School of Engineering and Computing: Supporting Adult Learners make the transition to HE and The Application of Science and Reporting
- School of Law and Social Sciences: Employability E-Forum for BA Social Science Students
- School of Life Sciences: Induction Micro site
- Caledonian Business School: Supporting Progression in a Connected Digital Age
- Learner Support: Building resources for integrated induction
- Students' Association: Effective Service Provision for part-time Students
- Student Empowerment Mini CoP: GCU Culture: bringing together the students at GCU
- Preparation and Induction Mini CoP: Pre-induction Resource Hub

These projects are running successfully and have increased staff and student engagement and support for Moving Forward and its work. Overall, the initiative has performed extremely well and continues to evolve. Key achievements and outcomes include:

- Evidence gathering on issues associated with student transition, engagement and progression
- Engagement with staff and students across the university
- Partnership working (including colleges)
- Development and ratification of the GCU Transition and Progression Framework

- Development and continuing expansion of six Mini-CoPs
- Negotiation, establishment and agreement of Partnership Agreements with the academic schools and Learner Support
- Introducing Moving Forward Development Funding Awards
- Sharing of practice, issues and ideas – internal and external
- Dissemination through GCU events and through national and international conferences

5. The GCU Widening Participation Strategy: A Transformative model of Widening Participation

The work lead by Moving Forward on developing, supporting the implementation of, and evaluating the GCU Transition and Progression Framework through partnership working between central departments, academic schools and the Students' Association to support a process of transformational change in the areas of pre-entry and transition as well as Learning, Teaching, Assessment and Feedback, has shown that effective approaches to supporting transition are dependent upon the proactive involvement of teaching staff and are embedded within programmes in terms of content, and learning, teaching and assessment strategies. It has also highlighted the challenges associated with staff and student engagement in processes of transformational change and the effort that is necessary to sustain long-term engagement against a background of significant changes within the Higher Education sector as well as on an institutional level. This has also brought to the fore the need for an implementation strategy which is clearly linked to the implementation of the University's Learning Teaching and Assessment Strategy (LTAS) and the Equality and Diversity Strategy. With its unique strategic approach Moving Forward has paved the way for such a strategy. The University recognises that transition and progression support should not be extraneous to the mainstream activity of the institution, but integral to the learning experience and, therefore, has agreed to adopt a transformative model to Widening Participation (Thomas, 2005).

The new Widening Participation Strategy, ratified in November 2010, has been informed by the experiences of Moving Forward, the work of the Greater Glasgow Articulation Partnership (GGAP) and research on Widening Participation (Thomas, et al., 2005) and on transition pedagogy (Kift, 2009) as well as the new policy guidelines of the Scottish Funding Council. The new Strategy allows GCU to develop an institutional culture that does not require participants to change before they can benefit from HE but rather perceives diversity

as a positive force. It promotes changes to the curriculum and pedagogy as well as more flexible provision in order to genuinely promote widening participation and lifelong learning. Its strategic objectives are to:

1. raise awareness and aspirations of HE with under-represented target groups
2. enhance the diversity of GCU's student body by pro-actively recruiting students from under-represented UK and international target groups
3. work with strategic partners e.g. schools, colleges, to prepare students for the academic and social transition to university
4. provide flexible routes into and through HE with a sustainable infrastructure for articulation
5. integrate support for transition, engagement and progression within learning, teaching and assessment strategies
6. enhance student support processes to ensure higher rates of progression, retention, completion and employability
7. position GCU as a leader in Widening Participation work at home and overseas
8. embed Widening Participation into the core activities of the university, ensuring collaborative, joined up evidence-based approaches and creating an efficient enabling structure to maintain and develop opportunities.

The Strategy also acknowledges that, in order to succeed, it needs to build on the work undertaken by Moving Forward whilst taking its work much further. Moving Forward's key achievements to date demonstrate that it has been a highly successful initiative, but it has also accentuated the barriers and challenges that accompany processes of transformational change. Whilst the operational plan that has been designed for implementing the new Strategy recognises that the formalised partnership agreements, for instance, may not necessarily be the way forward, it does utilise many of the approaches showcased by Moving Forward, such as Communities of Practice, sharing of practice, and partnership working.

6. References

- Barrie, S. C. (2009). 'Achieving Graduate Attributes' Keynote address at Scottish QAA Enhancement Themes Conference, Edinburgh, Scotland, 5-6 March.
- Campbell, E. (2006). *Easing Transition. Paper No. 1: Improving induction for non-traditional students*. UHI Millenium Institute.
- Campbell, E (2007). *Improving Induction for non-traditional entrants. Phase 2 (UHIMI)*

- Cook, A., Rushton, B.S., McCormick, S.M., & Southall, D.W. (2005). *Guidelines for the Management of Student Transition*. The STAR (Student Transition and Retention) Project, University of Ulster.
- Gorard, S. & Smith, E. (2006). *Review of widening participation research: addressing the barriers to participation in higher education. A report to HEFCE by the University of York*, Higher Education Academy and Institute for Access Studies, HEFCE. Retrieved February, 19, 2007, from http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/2006/rd13_06/
- Harvey, L., Drew, S., & Smith, M. (2006). *The first-year experience: a review of literature for the Higher Education Academy*. The Higher Education Academy.
- Kift, S. (2009). *Articulating a transition pedagogy to scaffold and to enhance the first year student learning experience in Australian higher education. A Final Report for ALTC Senior Fellowship Program*. Australian Learning & Teaching Council. Retrieved October 15, 2010, from <http://www.altc.edu.au/resource-first-year-learning-experience-kift-2009>
- Kift, S., Nelson, K., & Clarke, J. (2010). 'Transition pedagogy: A third generation approach to FYE - A case study of policy and practice for the higher education sector'. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 1 (1), 1-20.
- Krause, K. (2003). *Which way from here? Passion, policy and practice in first-year higher education*. Retrieved October 15, 2010, from http://www.fyhe.com.au/past_papers/keynote3.htm
- Krause, K. (2005). Serious thoughts about dropping out in the first year: Trends, patterns and implications for higher education, *Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development*. 2 (3), 55-68.
- Krause, K. (2006). On being strategic in the first year, Retrieved October 15, 2010, from <http://www3.griffith.edu.au/03/ltm/docs/GIHE-First-Year-Experience.pdf>
- Krause, K. (2007). *New perspectives on engaging First Year students in learning* Brisbane: Griffith Institute for higher Education. Retrieved October 15, 2010: http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/documents/events/20070308/FYE_Engagement_Krause.pdf
- QAA Enhancement Themes (2005). *Responding to Student Needs Report*. Glasgow, Scotland: The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education Scotland. Retrieved October 15, 2010, from http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/documents/studentneeds/Student_Needs_Full_Outcomes_FINAL29_6_05.pdf

- Scottish Government (2010). Students in Higher Education at Scottish Institutions 2008-9, Scottish Government, Statistics Publication Note, Lifelong Learning Series. Retrieved October 15, 2010 from <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2010/03/18144043/41>
- Thomas, L. (2002). Student Retention in Higher Education: The Role of Institutional Habitus, *Journal of Education Policy* 17, no. 4: 423-442.
- Thomas, L. (2005). Higher Education Widening Participation Policy in England: Transforming Higher Education or Reinforcing Elitism, *Ad-lib Journal for Continuing Liberal Adult Education*, 29, 2-4.
- Thomas, L., May, H., Harrop, H., Houston, M., Knox, H., Lee, M. F., et al. (2005). *From the Margins to the Mainstream. Embedding Widening Participation in Higher Education*, Universities UK.
- University of Strathclyde (2006). *Academic Strategy Action Plan- Session 2006/7*, University of Strathclyde
- Whittaker, R. (2008). *Quality Enhancement Themes: The First Year Experience. Transition to and during the first year*. Glasgow, Scotland: The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education Scotland. Retrieved October 15, 2010, from <http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/themes/FirstYear/outcomes.asp>