Welcome

Susan Stewart, Director of The Open University in Scotland (OUiS), welcomed 80 delegates from more than 30 organisations to Glasgow to discuss the place of adult learning in widening access (WA) to higher education (HE) in Scotland. Susan provided a useful context for the discussions of the day by reflecting on the changing policy landscape surrounding WA in Scottish HE since the publication of the final report of the Commission on Widening Access, *A Blueprint for Fairness*, in March 2016.

Key messages included:

- The need for wider recognition of the important work done by the OUiS in providing access to, and encouraging participation in, HE among disadvantaged groups (e.g. 1 in 5 new students have no previous educational qualification, 20% declare a disability, and 37% live in Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation 20/40 postcodes).

- The OUiS’s innovative and flexible approach to FE college partnerships is crucial to broadening out the focus of work around articulation and WA in Scotland.

- Challenging work to encourage and support ‘pre-access’ learners faces us. The OUiS’s Open Learning Champions model is an example of what can be achieved by working with learners most distant from HE using a combination of flexible learning materials and supportive networks within familiar learning environments.

- The OU has key role to play in the ongoing sector-wide commitment to WA in Scotland. With its experience of innovative partnership working, and as a national provider with unique geographical reach and flexible methods of delivery, it makes a real difference within and across Scotland’s communities.
Keynote: Fair access, lifelong learning and social justice

Professor Sir Peter Scott, Fair Access Commissioner of the Scottish Government, spoke to the main theme of the seminar, providing an overview of the changing policy and practice of WA and relating the scope, focus and ambition of his new role as Fair Access Commissioner. While acknowledging the progress made in Scotland, Peter noted the huge challenges still facing individual institutions, the sector as a whole and wider society in making access to HE truly fair. Peter highlighted the importance of foregrounding social justice rather than social mobility in driving the kind of WA that will make a difference to the most disadvantaged and disenfranchised groups in Scotland. Moreover, Peter lamented the decline in attention to and promotion of lifelong learning within HE, linking the availability and quality of lifelong learning opportunities for adults with the core purpose of WA.

Peter left delegates thinking through three main observations:

- It is important that the very distinctive contribution made by colleges to HE in Scotland is recognised, and celebrated. Quite simply, if Scottish HE is more ‘democratic’ than English HE, it is largely down to the colleges.
- If we really are serious about fair access, we have to ask searching questions about how we think about success, and even how we assess attainment. Is it reasonable to expect students from more diverse backgrounds to fit the historical study patterns set with students from a much narrower and more elite background in mind? HE needs to change, not just help students to fit in.
- Peter used his concluding comments to urge us to remember why WA matters. In a 21st-century economy we cannot afford to waste the talents of so many people. As Peter stressed: ‘It matters even more because in a 21st-century democracy access to advanced HE is as close to being a civic right, as a human right. If you are denied that opportunity, you are being denied your full rights as a citizen.’

Parallel workshops: The opportunities and challenges of reaching adult learners from all backgrounds and communities

1a) Using open online courses to support transitions from informal to formal learning

Dr Pete Cannell, Opening Educational Practices in Scotland, Project Co-Director, led a diverse group in a discussion of the merits of different models of organising and delivering informal learning in different settings as a means of accessing HE, and

1b) Supporting adult and lifelong learning through Scottish Union Learning

Tommy Breslin, Scottish Union Learning, Development Officer, offered an overview of SUL’s work with HE providers and other institutions in the workplace, noting the move away from leisure-based learning towards skills-based and professional development studies. Tommy led a discussion on SUL’s Union Learning Representative model, which has been successful in a number of contexts in opening up opportunities in the workplace, and supporting and encouraging work-based learners in making the transition into formal HE study.

Key challenges and opportunities noted include:

- Technology is still a barrier for many non-traditional learners.
- There is substantial challenge in motivating people to think of themselves as learners.
- The erosion of organised opportunities for adult learning (sharp decline in community learning development and college part-time provision) and the lack of resources and physical spaces to bring people together is a huge challenge.
- It is important to acknowledge the role of support, and for learners to understand structures of support during transitions into formal education.
- WA initiatives need to be long-term and should form around practitioner and learner voices.

2a) No qualifications, no problem – a discussion of the challenges and opportunities faced by our adult students returning to higher education from our most deprived communities

Kenny Anderson, Scottish Wider Access Programme West, Director, provided an overview of the history of SWAP and an account of its current position in the WA landscape in Scotland. The group was asked to consider the important role that SWAP, and similar initiatives, play in opening up HE, and in particular opening up ‘the professions’ to adult returners.

and

2b) Progression routes from the community to college to higher education: the role of part-time and full-time accredited courses and the Adult Achievement Awards

Marian Docherty, Newbattle Abbey College, Depute Principal, discussed the development of the Adult Achievement Awards and the unique role of Newbattle Abbey in providing access to learning opportunities. Marian outlined the function of the Adult Achievement Awards in supporting some of the most disadvantaged learners into formal study through a reflector process.

Key challenges and opportunities noted include:

- The role of funding, or lack of it, in shaping the nature and scope, and potential impact, of initiatives like SWAP and the Adult Achievement Awards.
- There are huge opportunities in creative partnership working – it doesn’t always require lots of funding to do good work, but always requires a degree of faith and sense of purpose.
- The Scottish FE and HE landscape is actually doing this partnership work well at the moment, and there is work to be done in identifying and sharing good practice. We need to think about how we gather and share evidence.
- It is possible for institutions to work more closely together and to reduce the sense of competition over WA learners. There are better outcomes for all if work is done collaboratively and with sense of a common purpose.
- We need to have an offer/platform for all learners so routes to HE are potentially open to all adults, whatever their circumstances.
- Social justice was identified as both a challenge and opportunity in the sense that it should be driving initiatives and interventions.

3) Widening access and adult participation: an overview, thoughts on the future and some questions

Dr Muir Houston, University of Glasgow, Senior Lecturer (Social Justice, Place and Lifelong Learning) led a session looking at the big picture and discernible trends in adult participation in HE in Scotland in recent years.

Key challenges and opportunities noted include:

- There has been a dramatic reduction in the numbers of part-time students across the UK since 2008, due in large part to changes to the funding of FE and HE.
- In Scotland, however, the introduction of the Part-Time Fee Grant means those on a low income can receive assistance with student fees and so funding may not be the only factor to consider when explaining the reduction in part-time student numbers in the college sector. Trends in Scotland’s colleges since 2008:
  - steep increase in students aged 24 and under
  - modest decline in students aged 25-39
  - steep decline in students aged 40-49
  - change in students aged 50 and over
- These changes could be a response to the economic crisis in 2008. Potentially young people are choosing to focus on their education and older people are choosing to stay in jobs (even if they are dissatisfied with those jobs) rather than take the risk of re-training.
- There was broad agreement that re-entering education as an adult could be daunting (even if they are dissatisfied with those jobs) rather than take the risk of re-training.
- There was also some agreement that a greater emphasis on credit transfer and accepting gaps in progress would assist some adult learners build up their degree over a period of time.
Panel discussion and reflections

The Panel, chaired by Dr Liz Marr, Director of Teaching, Learning and Teaching Innovation, The Open University, reflected on key messages emerging out of the parallel workshops and the keynote.

Some of the main issues arising were:

• The importance of recognising, and encouraging a wider recognition of, the value of having multiple points of entry and exit in HE.

• The panel discussed the ‘classic’ 4 year degree structure in Scotland, and noted that it was created in ‘another time and place’, and that we should not assume it works for, or fits, with the majority of learners today.

• WA inevitably means/requires making learning more personal and flexible.

• To really make an impact, the various schemes, projects and initiatives in play across the sector need to be better integrated, with more collaboration and sharing. The panel noted that we should be trying to avoid an overly competitive approach to WA.

• A related point: making a difference and realising impact in WA will require scaling up our efforts to support the most disadvantaged. We can’t continue to work in discrete and minor ways as this is not having the impact we/government desire.

• There was discussion around the role of different paths through and parallel to HE. The problem of over ‘qualifying’ the workforce was discussed, whereby jobs stay largely the same but increasingly require a degree as an entry or exit requirement.