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Progression and partnerships: finding ways forward

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Foreword

Sarah Hardman > As Deputy Director of the Sussex Learning Network (SLN), Sarah Hardman's remit has included the development of a framework and models to support learner progression into and through vocational higher education. She also deals with planning student number allocations, financial planning and management, and marketing.

Progression is at the heart of HEFCE's agenda for Lifelong Learning Networks. In the context of LLNs, a new and more flexible curriculum offer, improved information advice and guidance as well as progression agreements themselves, are all constructed with the aim of supporting vocational learners to progress into and through higher education.

Along with the other early funded LLNs, the SLN set out to develop an understanding of what progression agreements could achieve and how an LLN could facilitate this. Much of the initial discussion concerned terminology and definitions. What was the difference between an accord and agreement? What exactly did HEFCE mean by 'network-wide'? The debate ran on. One thing was clear, however. LLNs were tasked with making a real difference to the educational experience of vocational learners, and progression agreements (or accords) were a tool to assist us.

As one of the first to engage in this area of work, we agreed a model quite quickly and began to develop our approach alongside LLNs including the GMSA, MOVE and the Western Vocational LLN. We four became increasingly familiar with each other's models as we appeared together at conferences and events. And what stood out, as we rehearsed our various models, was the very different approach that each had taken. Some of us had focused on one particular qualification; others had looked more broadly at the vocational curriculum. Some had concentrated on progression from [National Qualifications Framework \(NQF\)](#) level 3 to level 4; others had incorporated movement within higher education, including from foundation degree to top-up.

HEFCE had tasked all LLNs with the:

"production of network-wide progression agreements underpinned by agreement on credit that defines clearly the expectations about progression that learners can reasonably hold and makes institutional commitments that these expectations will be met."

Our differing interpretations were discussed at an internal event organised by HEFCE on 5 January 2008. The SLN presented a definition of a progression agreement as 'an agreement that offers learners guarantees that support their admission to or progression within higher education'. The event surfaced some discussion around the levels of guarantee that different agreements offered.

HEFCE looked for a guarantee of places, and some LLNs stated that their agreements did just that. The SLN, however, argued that a guaranteed place was not the same as a guarantee of an unconditional offer. A guaranteed place assumed no conditions relating to level of English, for example, or financial status. Since this was simply not something that LLNs could guarantee, the SLN argued that guarantees should relate to an interview or an offer of a place.

The model adopted by the SLN is discussed in detail within this section, as are those of the GMSA and the Western Vocational LLN. The different approaches taken have enabled a significant period of testing, with learners now beginning to apply through the various agreements and being tracked through the process. This section also explores the importance and challenges of partnership working, fundamental to the development of progression agreements, as well as to the construction of a robust work-related curriculum offer. The challenge now will be in the promotion of the various agreements developed, both in terms of raising awareness of what is there, and ensuring its use, and in terms of the drawing together of progression on a regional or national basis, presenting a more coherent picture for learners whose decisions are not governed by the arbitrary boundaries created for the purpose of LLNs.

This is a challenge which in the South East is addressed by a consortium of four LLNs, tackling the issue of information, advice and guidance, including the communication of progression agreements, through the Learning at Work Information Service (LAWIS) project (please refer to section 4).



Sussex Learning Network – Progression Agreements



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Note: This article first appeared in a *Seminar report on progression agreements and accords* (May 2008), a publication by HEFCE exploring the approaches of a number of LLNs to the development of progression agreements.

The context

The Sussex Learning Network (SLN) was one of the first Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) to be funded by HEFCE. It became operational in September 2005. The SLN is made up of a partnership of four higher education institutions (HEIs), together with one mixed economy group (MEG) college, and six other further education (FE) colleges. The SLN is diverse in terms of the specialism, size and culture of each of its partner institutions. Of the HEIs for example, one is vocationally driven, one research intensive, one is small with recently awarded university status, and one a nationally focused institution. The universities are not in direct competition with each other and have a history of collaborating on a number of joint initiatives. The network also draws in the five sixth form colleges in Sussex, as well as local training provider and employer groups.

The SLN works across seven curriculum areas, shaped by the economic priorities and workforce development needs identified for Sussex. Activities range from mapping the curriculum, through curriculum and staff development, to the development of information, advice and guidance (IAG) resources and progression agreements. In each of the seven curriculum areas, curriculum leads are employed to work across the range of activities, including the development of progression agreements.

Across all activities the involvement of staff, students and employers is key. This is enabled via the curriculum groups, the student network (which includes a website designed and managed by vocational learners) and the SLN website.

The concept

Progression is a core focus of LLNs, and the [SLN business case](#) identified progression and a credit framework as an area of activity, although it made no mention of progression agreements as such.

The SLN has developed a progression accord to support vocational learners into and through higher education (HE). An essential element of the process and a key outcome is the closer working relationships developed between institutions, and between further and higher education, locally.

An existing progression accord – the Sussex Liaison and Progression Accord – operates between the three universities in Sussex, offering guaranteed consideration of applicants from local schools and colleges that have signed up to the accord. In most cases this results in a standard conditional offer of a place. The SLN aimed to construct an accord that would be vocationally relevant, offering the same level of consideration to learners applying via less traditional routes. They might be coming from the workplace, perhaps looking to study part-time, or might hold qualifications other than those cited in the local university and college prospectuses.

In particular, the SLN wanted to focus on pathways between courses and institutions where progression was problematic for vocational learners, as well as those where progression was happening but was dependent on individuals rather than being embedded into organisational structures. The SLN also wanted to offer something additional to the existing progression accord, in terms of a focus on progression not only into, but also through higher education. In the medium term these two accords may well become one, particularly when the new 14-19 diplomas become established.

The models

Progression via specific routes

The model adopted by the SLN takes the form of an overarching document, the [Sussex Vocational Progression Accord \(SVPA\)](#), signed by 26 partners, including all the providers of further and higher education in Sussex. The SVPA signifies the commitment of signatories to working together to support the progression of vocational learners into and through higher education. It is a document with a three-year life span which extends to 2010 and well beyond the initial funding period of the SLN itself.

Beneath the overarching accord sit a number of [subject specific progression agreements](#), one for each of seven areas of curriculum activity. These agreements are appendices to the accord. Each agreement focuses on a number of progression 'pathways' within the curriculum area, which have been identified either as problematic, or as not being embedded into organisational structures. In both cases, the premise is that a progression agreement, whereby the institutions concerned sign up to offering a guarantee relating to progression for certain groups of learners, would increase the opportunities and likelihood of these learners progressing.

Each of the subject-specific progression agreements, therefore, focusing on a range of progression pathways, consists of a number of bilateral agreements between individual institutions and relating to individual courses. By November 2007, there were 183 of these bilateral agreements in existence, and more in development. In some cases these agreements are not between two HE or FE institutions but, for example, between a local employer and a university.

The aim is for each progression pathway to draw in all local institutions offering provision in that subject area, thus ensuring the 'network-wide' reach and relevance of each agreement. Applicants will identify themselves as applying through the SVPA at the point of application, through a code that will be entered on applicants' UCAS forms, or on institutions' own application forms for direct applicants.

General improvements to aid progression

In addition to these very specific agreements, curriculum leads are also looking at the entrance requirements published by each of the providers locally, and will work with the management group set up to monitor the SVPA to improve the clarity and consistency of information provided to applicants whose qualifications or experience are not covered by the UCAS tariff. The aim here is to prevent a vocational applicant having to jump through an additional hoop. For example, they may be asked to contact the institution to discuss their qualification, whereas an A level student might be able to see from the institution's website or prospectus the grades they will require.

Taking the agreements forward and reflecting on emerging issues

The development process

The development of progression agreements in Sussex has surfaced a number of issues and challenges.

The mapping of the existing curriculum and identification of barriers to progression has, in a number of cases, highlighted gaps in provision which mean that progression in a linear sense may not currently be possible within Sussex. In the case of Community Practice, for example, one strand of work focuses on an area in which there is no consistently funded local provision at level 3 that would provide a vocational pathway into a Foundation degree. This raises additional issues about the insecure nature of funding for level 3 provision in some areas, and the implications of this on levels of demand for higher education.

Leads in a number of curriculum areas have worked on the development of new provision, primarily at Foundation degree level, to address identified gaps. In some cases it may be that demand is not sufficient locally to support the development of new provision, or that the most logical progression pathway for a learner takes them out of the SLN's area – particularly for learners living on the borders of Sussex. In these cases, a regional approach to progression would create a model that would make more sense to learners, and the SLN has been exploring opportunities for linkage with neighbouring LLNs to provide for this.

The development of progression agreements without the existence of sufficient additional student numbers (ASNs) to support an additional or enlarged intake creates problems in terms of capacity and, potentially, the inability to meet expectations. This is a particular issue in the case of progression from Foundation degree to honours programmes. The SLN chose to use ASNs to sponsor new curriculum development or the extension of the existing provision, and this in turn has provided the basis for thinking about progression. Due in part to issues of timing, the SLN did not opt to attach ASNs to the development of progression agreements, which would have been one approach to addressing difficulties in terms of capacity.

A fundamental question for those developing progression agreements relates to the definition of 'guaranteed progression'. LLNs have discussed various interpretations of this, and the practicalities of implementing them. The SLN has taken the view that progression cannot be guaranteed, but will always be dependent on a range of factors, whether they are in relation to successful completion of a work placement or course, a satisfactory reference, or to financial or other circumstances. The SLN progression agreements therefore offer guarantees relating to progression. These may be guarantees of an offer of a place (either conditional or unconditional) or of an interview. For learners satisfying the institution's requirements, a guaranteed offer guarantees the opportunity to progress.

Any issues of trust, competition and confidence that arose in the initial stages of development, particularly in terms of cross-institutional working, were addressed on a subject-by-subject basis as each agreement was drawn up. The establishment of the SVPA Management Group (see below) with representation from all FE and HE partners, as the mechanism for sustaining the SLN's work on progression, has been useful in gaining the buy-in of individuals within the various partner institutions.

Presenting progression to learners

A key challenge is the way in which agreements are communicated to learners, so that the SLN is successful in achieving its aim of increasing opportunities. There is a risk with agreements that are not all-encompassing that learners may be unaware of the range of additional opportunities that do exist, but to which progression agreements are not attached. It is essential to ensure that learners' options are not inadvertently narrowed by the development of progression agreements that focus on specific pathways. This is something that the SLN will need to address via the materials that are produced, and effective signposting to other sources of information will be key.

To address this, the SLN is developing a 'smart' online tool, that allows the user to quickly narrow their search via a series of questions. Using this a learner will only be presented with the progression agreement that fits his or her interests and experience. The online tool will be promoted to learners via an extensive programme of presentations to schools, colleges, employer groups and advisory agencies, as well as on institutional websites and print materials, and internally via institutional intranets and newsletters.

The approach taken by the SLN means that each progression agreement is very different. There is no template being followed. In some curriculum areas there is a focus on certain levels (eg entry to HE, progression from Foundation degree, etc); in others there is a focus on specific subjects within the curriculum area (eg land based subjects within the Biosciences area). The diversity and specific nature of the agreements is a real strength, allowing the guarantees offered to be tailored appropriately and to make a real difference to learners. It is also a significant challenge, and again, clarity is essential in communicating this to learners and their advisers.

The emphasis on Foundation degrees, and the focus on progression not only into but also through higher education, does create a potential for the devaluing of foundation degrees as a qualification in their own right. Alongside the promotion of opportunities for learners to 'top up' to honours level, it is important to make clear to learners and employers the value of the Foundation degree as a stand-alone qualification, and the validity of stepping off the progression ladder at that point or indeed at the earlier certificate or diploma stage .

The clarity, consistency and accuracy of admissions criteria made available to learners and employers across the range of FE and HE partners remains a key issue to address. Discrepancies in information produced by one institution, or by an institution and its partners, as well as a frequent lack of detail in relation to vocational qualifications, mean that in some cases progression may well be hindered. This might be due to the additional effort that a learner coming via a vocational pathway is required to put in to access the same level of information that a learner coming via a more 'traditional' academic pathway would find easily on the website or in the prospectus.

Equally, it might be that a learner coming via a vocational pathway is discouraged from applying, having formed the impression that the institution views them as different, and 'non-mainstream'. If the intention is to target 'non-traditional' learners through this work, these issues must be addressed. Many of these learners are less likely to benefit from the support, and knowledge of the education system (available to those following the full-time academic route) to enable them to navigate unclear information at the enquiry stage, and will be the very learners likely to be discouraged by this situation. The fact that course staff may be sympathetic to non-traditional learners counts for little if the criteria for admission aren't encouraging them to apply in the first instance.

Making staff and intermediaries aware of progression

Just as the clear and consistent promotion of progression agreements to learners is essential, there will be an ongoing staff development need to ensure that staff within each of the institutions are able to implement the agreements effectively. This is particularly difficult with academic staff where responsibility for admissions often changes on an annual basis. Members of the SVPA management group (see below) will have a role to ensure that staff within their institution are equipped to implement the agreements effectively on an ongoing basis, and a series of staff development events will introduce staff to the agreements.

Promotion of the progression accords is supported by the work of the SLN Staff Development Officer who manages a team of Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) Officers. This team works to raise awareness of the web- and paper-based IAG resources they have developed, as well as of progression agreements, through a programme of roadshows and presentations throughout the current academic year. The programme is aimed at colleagues in FE and HE, as well as intermediary agencies and employers.

Mainstreaming progression

The sustainability of the progression agreements developed through the Sussex Learning Network is a real issue, and the failure to implement an effective mechanism to ensure this would have the potential to cause significant damage to the trust built up between the various institutions involved, particularly between FE and HE.

A management group with membership from FE and HE has been set up to oversee the implementation of the SVPA, and to ensure its sustainability. Members of the management group will also have an ongoing role to ensure effective implementation of the agreements within their institution.

The SLN is exploring the potential for mainstreaming the development of progression agreements, through extension of the model without the provision of additional resource. The first example of this is in the areas of Engineering and Construction, where the SLN is working with academics within the relevant institutions locally to map and enhance progression opportunities.

Tracking learners

Tracking learners and gathering evidence of the impact of the progression agreements presents a real challenge, and one that is heightened by the tight timescales available within any short-term funded initiative to produce evidence of impact.

The tracking of learners applying via the SVPA will be managed by a flagging system; applicants will self-identify at point of application, and institutions will flag SVPA learners on their internal student records systems. This will allow the progress of individual students to be tracked and enable a profile of SVPA learners to be developed via the data collected for the HESA return.

The impact of the wider work around entry requirements will be more complex to track. It would be impossible to determine whether an applicant coming via a vocational route has entered HE as a direct result of the SLN's work. However, the SLN is looking at ways of gauging the impact of this work via comparisons with previous years' data, with particular reference to the QVALENT2 (highest qualification on entry) and POSTCODE fields on the HESA return. The hope is that this will provide a useful indicator of % increase of applicants coming via vocational routes, and of successful applicants. This would only provide an indicator, however, as the SVPA is aimed at applicants who are either living, working or studying in Sussex. Those working or studying but not living in Sussex would not be identified via POSTCODE field tracking.

Concluding comments

In the next phase of development, the SLN will focus on the incorporation of a credit framework, and the accreditation of prior or experiential learning (AP(EL) gained through work. This will enable institutions to begin to look seriously at possibilities for learners and employers around building previous experience together with credit gained through continued professional development (CPD) into higher-level qualifications.

There are significant challenges to be faced in the development of progression agreements. However, the process has brought about a range of positive developments, many of which relate to closer and better working relationships between institutions. In particular, these improved relationships are between FE and HE which, if capitalised on, offer the opportunity for significant improvements to delivery. In the longer term, these improvements will support learner progression without the need for the development of official progression agreements.

References

Sussex Vocational Progression Accord

www.sussexlearningnetwork.org.uk/documents/SVPA.pdf

About SLN Progression Agreements

www.sussexlearningnetwork.org.uk/progression-agreements



Progression to HE by students of Early Years (Children's Care, Learning and Development)



Pete Bailey and Sue Upton, Varndean College >

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Sue Upton is Head of Business, Sport and Travel at Varndean College, Brighton. She completed a degree in Social Policy as a mature student, and started teaching Health & Social Care at Crawley College on a part-time basis. Coming to Varndean as Course Co-ordinator, she taught BTEC Early Years, Health and Social Care AS, A2, GCSE and **National Qualifications Framework (NQF)** level 1.

What are the significant factors determining whether students of level 3 BTEC Early Years (now called Children's Care, Learning and Development, or CCLD) progress to higher education (HE)? Varndean College in Brighton, a sixth form college of 1300 students, has over a number of years seen students achieve very good grades in the BTEC course (equivalent to three grade As at A-level). These students were capable of going on to HE, but did not always do so. Many of these students come from backgrounds that don't have a tradition of going on to HE.

Methods

Forty-five students were included in the research; about half of those were current students about to complete their BTEC course and about half were ex-students. Of these 45 students, 23 either had not progressed, or were not intending to go on to HE, while 22 already had or were intending to do so. The respondents filled in a questionnaire that provided basic background data and were then interviewed in order to obtain a more detailed understanding of the reasons for their choices.

Results

The questionnaire attempted to find out if there was a correlation between a decision to go on to HE and factors such as previous school, GCSE results, parental experience of education, experience of HE in the rest of the family and parental occupation. The data showed that there was very little correlation between attendance at a particular school and a decision to go on to HE. Similarly, the level of educational achievement as measured by GCSE results was not a significant factor.

Family background was more significant. Perhaps not surprisingly, students from working-class backgrounds were less likely to go on to HE than those from other backgrounds. This was reflected by the data on whether any other family member had experience of HE.

The students who planned to go or who actually went to HE *and* came from a family with no history of HE were more likely to go on to HE if their parents had undergone some sort of education or training since leaving school.

In other words, the quantitative data suggested that the key factors affecting the decision to go on to HE related to parental and wider family experience of HE, and also parental experience of additional education and training.

The decision was found not to be related to academic ability or experiences in students' 11–16 school. The informal interviews were therefore aimed at exploring the reasons why, in particular, able students were reluctant to go on to HE. The results of these interviews suggested that a key factor was finance.

Students were put off by the idea that they would incur a large debt and, despite having received information about student finance and the support available, they had generally not absorbed this information and not really applied it to themselves and their situation. Many of them also felt the need to be out working and earning money, although they recognised that in the long run a degree might prove financially advantageous. It was suggested that HE would be more attractive if they could work at the same time. However, they were unfamiliar with the possibilities of combining study with work. Many saw HE as 'not for the likes of them'.

The students who had chosen HE were often encouraged by their parents, and had also had some particular personal encouragement or intervention from a teacher that had enabled them to see themselves as a possible university student.

Conclusions and recommendations for our institution are as follows:

- CCLD students need to receive more individualised information about HE and in particular the financial support available
- Past students need to be involved in this process to provide role models and examples of successful HE
- Parents need to be involved also – evening meetings, specifically aimed at the parents of CCLD students, could be held to explain a student's current course and their future options
- At every opportunity CCLD staff need to be positive and specific about individual students' chances of going on to HE and help them see it as a possibility for them personally
- CCLD staff should provide more information about Foundation degrees



The development of progression agreements – why bother?



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Introduction

This article aims to stimulate discussion around the development of progression agreements (PAs). The issues identified are ones that have arisen while undertaking this work over the last two years and reflect the breadth of opinions expressed. Although I remain a strong advocate of PAs, I wanted to use this opportunity to explore some of the issues, and to recognise that the path to achievement of network-wide PAs is a difficult one to tread.

The concept of using PAs is not a new one, and not just something which Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) have been tasked with achieving. Agreements existed before LLNs were conceived, as did progression accords and compacts, but the decision to invest funding of £105 million in 30 LLNs across England placed new attention upon them. For the first time, teams of people were charged with the development of PAs. These teams were, therefore, best placed to respond to guidance from the funders of the LLNs, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).

HEFCE expected LLNs to develop PAs that:

- Support learners' legitimate expectation to progress from specific programmes or institutions to other programmes or institutions, and establish the commitment of institutions to meet those expectations
- Are negotiated and make credit transfer a reality
- Are developed on a network-wide basis, with all the institutions that form part of the LLN

The purpose of the PAs developed through the work of the LLNs was to produce a boost for an identified learner constituency which had a focus upon the vocational learner. This was not about an individual learner's ability but rather about the recognition of the learning experience provided by their programme of study. The ultimate aim of the development was to provide clarity about what opportunities were available in higher education (HE) for learners on that previous programme of study.

In particular, PAs have been used to support an increasing number of vocational and work-based learners progressing into HE programmes. This fits closely with the policy agenda to support the widening participation of under-represented groups from lower socio-economic backgrounds, as there is evidence that these people are over-represented on vocational learning programmes (2004).

Gorard *et al* (2006), in a review of widening participation research, suggested that the differences in patterns of participation between socio-economic groups are complex and multi-faceted, due to the prevalence of three types of barrier:

- Situational – such as direct and indirect costs, loss or lack of time, and distance from a learning opportunity, created by an individual's personal circumstances
- Institutional – such as admissions procedures, timing and scale of provision and general lack of institutional flexibility – created by the structure of available opportunities
- Dispositional – in the form of an individual's motivation and attitudes to learning, which may be caused by a lack of suitable learning opportunities (eg for leisure or informally), or poor previous educational experience

Research by Conner *et al* (2006), partly funded by this LLN, made an attempt to explore HE admissions issues affecting the entry of vocational learners. Key findings of the work suggested a common pattern in HEI responses to vocational learners as a result of a number of factors:

- A continuing lack of parity of esteem between vocational and academic pathways, leading to lingering prejudice against and negative valuing of vocational qualifications
- Lack of awareness and knowledge in many HEIs about pre-HE vocational qualifications and their curricula
- Frequently, a lack of clarity in the presentation of course entry requirements and difficulties for vocational applicants in working out how vocational qualifications will be treated in the admissions process and what grades are required
- Perceptions by HE staff about the subject relevance and 'curriculum fit' of some vocational qualifications
- Practices of benchmarking against GCE A-levels to set course entry requirements
- Misconceptions by some HE staff about the commitment of young people with different entry qualifications and their ability to succeed in the HE learning environment

Taking both pieces of research into account there was clearly a role to be played by PAs to promote social inclusion, as well as working towards equality of treatment for vocational learners in accessing HE (when compared with the experience of A-level learners). But significant barriers exist and if effective PAs are to be delivered, a system must evolve to produce the desired results, without infringing the autonomy of the HE provider to make appropriate admissions decisions.

GMSA Pathways Programme

Like many other LLNs the Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance (GMSA) developed PAs that came about through collaborative working between partner institutions. Negotiations to identify which particular [National Qualifications Framework \(NQF\)](#) level 3 feeder programmes could progress to named HE programmes underpinned this. Although many of the HE providers in the sub-region provided detailed entry criteria, there was a lack of programme-specific entry criteria. That is, if a learner had followed a specific level 3 programme such as a BTEC National Diploma in Construction, and had achieved, say, three merit grades, which HE programmes would welcome this as an entry qualification? PAs could solve this problem.

An online enquiry system was created to allow vocational learners to explore their opportunities within Greater Manchester (www.pathways.gmsa.ac.uk). This allows vocational learners to indicate their programme of study, input their grades, and explore the possibilities available to them which have been captured in the PAs. Although there is much room for development – and this will be undertaken on a continuing basis during the funding period of the LLN – a working system exists. One of the key lessons learnt from the work of the LLN has been that PAs are dynamic and, as such, are never complete. New feeder programmes and new destinations are being added on an almost weekly basis as further negotiations take place.

The process of achieving a suite of network-wide PAs is not easy. Long periods of careful negotiation are required at the curriculum level and with admissions systems. There is an inference that the problem with securing clarity of progression opportunities lies with the intransigence of Higher Education Institutes (HEIs). However, one must also look at the role of the level 3 providers. In recent research undertaken by Greater Manchester Aimhigher it was recognised that the consistency of support for progression in the colleges studied, and the levels of uptake of this support, varied widely (Moore *et al*, 2008).

Consequently, not all the learners were receiving the same range of activities and mechanisms to coordinate such activities were not always in place. Colleges were therefore unable to identify which learners had taken advantage of which types of activity. Clearly, if PAs are to have an impact upon increasing opportunities in HE for vocational learners, then development work is required with both the feeder and the destination institutions.

Beyond the issues recognised above there are some more fundamental questions raised by the process of developing PAs. It is evident that for any HEI of considerable size it will be impossible to capture the full range of provision within PAs. Just one of our partner universities has in the region of 1500 separate UCAS codes for its provision, and we have another six HEIs in the partnership. Consequently, PAs that can be developed in the lifetime of the LLN are only going to touch on a percentage of the full range of provision.

The implication of this is that what is displayed through PAs could be interpreted as narrowing the choice available to learners. This is despite repeated messages to learners within the PA documentation that PAs only show a limited range, and that there are many other opportunities that vocational learners can apply for. This point is further exacerbated by the fact that the LLN operates on a sub-regional basis and collects opportunities only from the Greater Manchester higher education providers in the partnership

A further issue arises regarding the time frame in which the LLN must operate because of the allocated funding period. The three-year life of the LLN has allowed time to be spent in establishing progression systems, but it is only in the last year of funding that the fully operational system will come into being. Although it is certainly possible to build-in time frames to PAs that extend beyond the lifetime of the LLN, there will still be a need to maintain such a system for it to operate for the continuing benefit of learners. It is also worth considering that if the LLN or a similar lobbying body is no longer in existence, will the same impetus to promote vocational progression be there?

Perhaps the most important issue around the development of PAs is, are they necessary? Research has shown that progression to HE by learners with vocational qualifications is low compared with other groups. A report by Action on Access (2005) estimates that progression by the age of 21 for those with level 3 vocational qualifications is only half the rate for those with GCE A-levels (about 45% compared to 90%).

So there is certainly a case to be made for additional support for such learners. But does the use of PAs simply reinforce the view that learners on these programmes require some special advantage? If such qualifications are to be viewed as having equal standing with A-levels then they should stand as such in their own right. What is required, then, is a shift in perceptions and attitude among those making admissions decisions – and supporting vocational learners with PAs allows the entrenched perceptions and attitudes to remain.

To follow this argument through, PAs are actually papering over the cracks in a system that requires deep-rooted cultural change. By selecting level 3 programmes that require the benefits of PAs the suggestion is that they are different learning experiences which are not treated equally with A-level qualifications. Consequently it can be argued that PAs actually reinforce the inequalities that have existed in the system for many years.

It can also be argued that developing PAs for existing programmes is beginning the work at the wrong point. The difficulties of working with existing curricula, at both the feeder and destination point, entails a curriculum mapping exercise that has no guarantee of success. A more effective but much longer term solution would be to carry out this exercise at a much earlier stage so that, at validation for example, HE programmes would identify the suitable feeder qualifications and would build PAs into the validation process. Similarly the development of new level 3 programmes should be agreed with HE providers in terms of these containing the appropriate curriculum experience to enable learners to progress to identified higher education provision, which could again be wrapped into a PA.

While recognising that there are many issues around the development of PAs through the work of LLNs I remain firmly in favour of their development. Until a culture shift is achieved, vocational learners need support to overcome the barriers they face. The awarding bodies and the deliverers of level 3 vocational learning need to become much stronger advocates of the progression of these learners. The rigour of the programmes and the development of skills in independent learning are insufficiently recognised in HE and need to be promoted much more effectively. HEIs must recognise that the demographic downturn and the increasing promotion of government targets requiring 40% of UK adults skilled to university level by 2020 require a broadening of their target audience if they are to continue to operate at the same level of activity. Until both these aspirations are achieved, PAs can play a significant role and contribute to adding clarity to progression opportunities.

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One approach to developing progression agreements



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Introduction

Drawing on the report written by Steve Dear (Director of WVLLN) for the LLN Symposium in October 2007, this article presents a picture of the processes involved with the development of the WVLLN progression agreements, and some of the issues involved in the strategy that our LLN adopted to try to broaden vocational progression to higher education.

The main rationale for LLNs is to improve the coherence, clarity and certainty of progression opportunities for vocational learners into and through higher education. Although HEFCE identified the core characteristics which they expected an LLN to include, they expected different and innovative approaches to be taken. However, a key element required of all LLNs was the production of network-wide progression agreements (PAs).

Hitherto, PAs had tended to be localised arrangements between specific schools and departments within HE institutions. Therefore it was with trepidation that our team of progression coordinators began the journey towards designing agreements that would span our network. The first stage involved an audit of existing arrangements, which revealed limited local provision that was predominantly informal and for which there was inconclusive evidence of take-up.

Progression from BTEC National Diplomas

Although it was clear that network-wide agreements were necessary in order to facilitate the progression opportunities for vocational learners, the question was: 'where to start'? One recurring idea was the concept of transferability. Conventionally, learners following an A-level route have a wide range of opportunities to progress and are not restricted by the subjects studied at [National Qualifications Framework \(NQF\)](#) level 3, whereas their vocational counterparts are viewed (both by tutors and students alike) as having only a limited pathway. For example if an A-level student studies English, Psychology and Maths the opportunities to progress to HE are considerable. Conversely, the vocational student who undertakes a BTEC National Diploma in Health and Social Care is viewed as being channelled into their original specialisation and therefore locked into that particular discipline area.

The decision to focus on BTEC National Diplomas resulted from discussions around qualifications and their reputation, together with the knowledge that they were nationally recognised (the most common free-standing vocational qualification). Following on from this decision, extensive consultation and curriculum mapping took place to demonstrate that skills and knowledge acquired within one discipline can be applied elsewhere and afford the learner a realistic chance of successful study.

Simply writing agreements that facilitated progression from BTEC subject to undergraduate subject would not push the boundaries any further. Unless the agreements were such that they recognised the transferability of skills and subject expertise, potential progression options would still be restricted. It was acknowledged that this intensive work was necessary in order to produce a credible evidence base, rather than simply saying to admissions tutors that it was the 'right thing to do'.

Resulting from this work by the team of progression coordinators (together with subject-strand support), PAs based around BTEC National Diploma leading into the following LLN priority subject areas have been produced: Business, Creative Media, Engineering, Health and Social Care. Additionally, NVQ-based agreements have been developed in health and social care and in early years subject areas to reflect the preponderance of NVQ provision in these fields. The new diplomas have been included where there is sufficient maturity of curriculum design to afford credible judgements. All agreements have been approved and supported by the WLLN Management Board and were 'signed off' in January 2008.

Key to the success of these agreements has been the process of liaison, negotiation and mapping which has clearly not only raised awareness but created a more comprehensive understanding of the strengths offered by vocational qualifications. It is this continual dialogue between admissions, registry and subject tutors that will ensure that the agreements are living documents, not just 'pieces of paper sitting on a dusty shelf somewhere'.

It is widely accepted that much of the work associated with vocational progression issues boils down to attitudinal change. Without long-term support, development, publicity and maintenance, their impact is lost. Some of the most recent aspects of vocational progression into and through HE are up against entrenched practice: they can only benefit from a little TLC!

Transferability

The WLLN has explored transferability as an approach to progression, which may complement or extend specific inter-institutional arrangements. It is possible that agreements based around transferability may survive local institutional change which can undermine very specific relationships and arrangements.

Overall perhaps, transferability contributes to the wider generalisation that it is essential to break out of deficit and compensatory models of action for vocational learners. Recognition of the validity of vocational qualifications and experience in their own right is essential for their long-term acceptance and position in HE. Progression agreements lie at the centre of a circle of concentric strategies which ultimately must penetrate and transform significant sections of the HE curriculum and pedagogy. Genuinely integrated approaches are necessary to make vocational opportunity real, appropriate and relevant across the sector.

Follow this link to see diagrams illustrating progression opportunities for vocational learners using the WLLN progression agreements.

<http://www.wvlln.ac.uk/staff-room/wvlln-contributing-to-the-progression-of-vocational-learners>

Staff development for the delivery of blended learning in a partnership programme



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Introduction

This research consisted of individual interviews and focus groups and was focused on staff development issues raised in a programme designed by the Universities of Brighton, Sussex and Chichester, in partnership with Sussex Police. The programme develops 300 new police officers each year through a Foundation certificate ([The Foundation Certificate in Policing in Partnership with Communities](#)) delivered on three sites (in two universities) with four intakes each year.

This is a complex higher education (HE) programme, made even more complicated by the need to develop 18 experienced police trainers from their FE/NVQ professional standards to become student-centred associate lecturers, able to deliver a HE learning experience through a blended learning approach.

Developing HE-ness

HE in the UK has expanded in recent years to develop and accommodate a wide range of non-traditional provision. This expansion extends opportunities to study at HE level to many more people. In order to widen participation, universities have sought to enable people to study without requiring them to attend conventional university provision.

This has been achieved in a number of ways that have provided greater flexibility in geographical access and have overcome some of the issues that present barriers to wider involvement in HE in the UK. One of the key ways in which universities and colleges have succeeded in offering wider opportunities has been through the development of partnerships which enable HE to be made available in locations other than a university campus and in situations where provision had not previously been easily available.

An essential aspect of this partnership between HE and the police was that the existing police trainers would become the tutors for the new partnership programme, able to teach and assess in ways that would support learners to achieve [National Qualifications Framework \(NQF\)](#) level 4 and level 5.

Accommodating the formal requirements of academic and professional frameworks

This partnership between HE and the police was designed to deliver initial police training and development. It had, therefore, to support students to achieve the standards of performance required to become a police officer alongside achieving the academic standards required for a Foundation certificate. To achieve the National Occupational Standards for policing, students had to develop and apply knowledge, skills and understanding in the real workplace of a police officer, as simulation was not admissible. Therefore the programme was designed to include a substantial amount of workplace experience alongside the campus-based learning.

The team of former police trainers were very confident about how to support learners to achieve the police occupational standards, but very nervous about supporting learners to achieve HE standards – many of the team were not themselves graduates. This was in itself a potential problem, because the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) code of practice places responsibility for staff development in collaborative programmes on the HE institution:

“The awarding institution should be able to satisfy itself that staff engaged in delivering or supporting a collaborative programme are appropriately qualified for their role, and that a partner organisation has effective measures to monitor and assure the proficiency of such staff.” (QAA, 2004)

The phrase ‘properly qualified staff’ is used in the discussion following this quote. This raises the issue of what ‘properly qualified’ might mean for a course intended to achieve both employment and HE standards.

These two dimensions are often addressed in professional programmes (in nursing, for example) by expecting staff to spend a number of days each year updating themselves in the workplace in their professional role alongside the expectation that they will gain a qualification in teaching in HE. We used this model for the police partnership programme and insisted that all the teaching team worked towards achieving at least a first degree and that they all also spent a number of days each year on regular policing duties.

In addition to these programmes of study, the University of Brighton’s Centre for Learning and Teaching (CLT) set up a series of training days focusing on assessment in HE. These sessions provided a forum in which the module assignments were developed alongside assessment criteria, and in which the tutors compared their interpretation of assessment and their judgments about grading.

A system was developed whereby assignments were double-marked by staff on the same campus and then the module leader sampled the assignments to compare marking across all campuses. Two ‘staff tutors’ were appointed from the university academic staff to provide personal support and guidance, observation of teaching sessions, and feedback. Their roles rapidly increased to include monitoring assignment marking before exam boards.

The professional requirements were met through three police development units that covered the geographic spread of the county. Student officers were posted to one geographic location where they were supervised by a team of inspectors, sergeants and tutor constables. Each tutor constable worked one-to-one with a student officer and was able to choose which calls to respond to with their student, gradually exposing students to wider ranges of work as their competence and confidence increased.

This team had considerable experience of assessing competence against the national standards as it had been a part of the previous training approach. The only difference necessary for this programme was that the periods of placement alternated with periods of campus-based study and, once the full four cohorts each year were running, these development units had to work within this timetable rather than the previous (much longer) periods of placement. Record keeping was similar, although some additional recording was developed to enable the achievement of occupational standards to be accommodated in the Foundation degree credit scheme.

Accommodating learning in the classroom, 'on the job' and e-learning

The campus-based learning was delivered in groups of 20 using workshop and group-style learning with an occasional lecture. Each cohort had approximately six weeks of campus-based learning followed by six weeks in the workplace, through a 43-week long programme, after which successful participants were appointed as independent patrol police officers, and had completed a Foundation certificate and half the level 5 credits required for a Foundation degree.

The programme was designed to take learners through staged progression, using the campus-based sessions as an introduction to the role, including knowledge, skills, attitudes and discussion to develop wider understanding alongside the development of study and research skills. The following block of workplace experience focused on application of the theoretical work and reflection on the experience and any issues that arose. The students were closely supervised in the workplace and the reflective accounts were used as the basis of supervisory meetings and also contributed to accreditation. Some staff development time was needed to prepare workplace supervisors for this enhanced role which built on their previous approach and required them to be aware of the phased approach linking theoretical and applied learning.

A further element was introduced with the development of some e-learning elements. The primary purpose of this was to provide an alternative, flexible resource that would enable students to study modules at a time and place different to those of the previous cohorts. It soon became evident, however, that the campus-based staff team were uncomfortable with any teaching approach that was not face-to-face. Much of the staff development time was focused on how to support students to study more independently and to prepare assignments that increasingly required research skills.

The tutors appreciated the value of more independent learning but a number of constraints were identified. These included:

- Tutors feeling that they were not doing their jobs properly if they were not working face-to-face with students
- The police culture emphasis on accounting for hours worked in a specific location and the perception that the library was not the equivalent of a classroom
- Fear of students not using their time effectively unless they were supervised
- Concern that the research may take students into unfamiliar territory that would leave the tutors feeling less confident
- Tutors' varied experience and confidence with research
- Tutors' lack of technical ability in e-learning

Staff development was necessary to address all these issues.

Nurturing independent career-long learning

For the trainers, an experiential learning approach was familiar and welcome as it was already used confidently in their training sessions. They were also familiar with the idea of learning journals, although these were rarely used. We developed a template to help the learner to structure written learning accounts that helped them to move through stages of reflective learning; this proved very useful both in the learning process and in assessment.

The template for an account of reflective learning can be used to report on any incident, requiring the learner to describe the incident and then to write paragraphs about how they had interpreted it, what decisions they made, what actions they planned and took and what resulted from those actions. The final section requires the learner to state what they learnt from the results of their actions and what, if anything, they would do differently if they found themselves in a similar situation again.

These reflective accounts provided the basis for professional discussions about personal development (which were also recorded as audio files) and were used as evidence to support accreditation from assessment of occupational standards. Developmental action planning linked well with this reflective practice approach and was appreciated in the police culture, as it was based on the collection and use of evidence to inform judgment.

A model that shaped our thinking through the whole programme design helped us to plan for development of confident learners who would be increasingly able to manage their own learning and so be well prepared to continue to manage their own professional development throughout their careers. A diagram was drawn with the programme represented by a tall rectangle. This was divided into 43 horizontal lines, representing the weeks of the programme. From the top right corner of the rectangle a line was drawn down to the bottom left corner. The section that contained the first week and reduced amounts of each following week represented the amount of teaching that would be planned – effectively setting out a pathway for increasingly learner-led weeks as the end of the course was reached.

The experiential learning approach was built in by scheduling five or six weeks as blocks of alternate campus-based learning and placement-based learning, enabling concepts and techniques to be introduced in the classroom but quickly experienced and applied in the practical setting. Although the work setting is real and cannot be predicted, these tutors are able to select areas of work that are most likely to enable the student officer to carry out the range of activities scheduled for their stage of development. Many students found this approach to personal development a revelation and appreciated that it provides a foundation for career-long development.

Learning and teaching issues raised in this collaboration

There are always implications for developers in HE when establishing a Foundation degree because any partnership brings the need to negotiate and accommodate priorities other than HE ones. In this collaboration the Sussex Police priority was to refocus from the previous national training approach to develop police officers capable of working effectively in contemporary local communities. For the HE partners, a number of issues have been raised in developing a programme in partnership with an organisation that has a well-established tradition of skills-based practical training. These issues include:

- Aligning HE frameworks with National Occupational Standards
- Complying with HE and Home Office quality assurance requirements
- Developing staff from 'trainer' to 'HE lecturer'
- Designing an HE learning experience that includes work-based development and assessment of practice alongside wide community involvement
- Ensuring that students have a similar experience on each of the HE campuses
- Developing students in communities where they increasingly gain law-enforcement powers
- Use of an educational programme to contribute to culture change within the police to accommodate the changing needs and expectations of society

In some ways, these issues are no different from those faced by developers of other public service programmes, particularly those for doctors, nurses and social workers. For the partner universities there are also questions to consider about the role of universities as local communities involved in policing and in the emerging discourse about the future of policing.

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