

# Developing Distance Education in the Context of Work-Based Learning Communities: Learning to Care, A UK Open University Widening Participation Initiative

*Susan Dey, Roger Mills, Angela Schofield*

The UK Open University, Cambridge, UK

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The present UK Government has put particular emphasis on widening access to and participation in Higher Education (HE) in England and Wales, (Higher Education in Scotland and Northern Ireland is subject to different policies). The target is that 50% of the UK 19-30 population should have had at least one full-year or its part-time/distance equivalent study experience of HE by 2010. The current UK higher education participation rate is 44% on average, which masks significantly lower participation rates in some parts of the country. Although this target is controversial, with a sizable majority arguing for more resources to be directed to developing intermediary skills, (e.g. nurse and paramedic rather than doctor and researcher training), it is Government policy and is being implemented with some speed. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Learning and Skills Council is effecting the implementation of this national target through the development of a range of strategies, the main one of which is known as *Aim Higher: Partnerships for Progression* which is designed to raise aspirations and to encourage the development of clear progression routes into Higher Education.

It is, however, important to achieve a balance between improving participation in higher education and ensuring sufficient numbers of skilled technicians. Figures suggest that the UK is well behind other European countries in generating the 'technician skills' which the economy lacks with just 28% of the workforce qualified at this level compared with 51% in France and 65% in Germany. One way of achieving this balance is the introduction of *Foundation Degrees* with 50,000 additional places planned by 2006. Here the new network of sector skills councils currently being created by government is ensuring a better link between public investment in education and training and the needs of employers who are demanding much greater involvement in what schools, colleges and Universities are teaching. (London Times 2004)

Although this paper describes a particular project, and looks at particular programmes within the Open University, we believe that the issues underlying these are of interest and direct relevance to colleagues working in very different situations across the Commonwealth.

It is clear that we in the UK need to have a much more co-ordinated approach to progression issues throughout the whole of education. This is particularly true if we are to make any impact on those sections of society that have traditionally had low aspirations for education and/or have made little use of opportunities provided by Universities. On a personal level this

is a tragedy for individuals and on a national level it means that in an economy increasingly dependent on ideas and service provision, the country is not making the most of its potential human abilities.

Some of the current Aim Higher projects in the UK have demonstrated that it is necessary to start with children as young as 12 if they are to become comfortable with the idea of continuing their education after school leaving age and on to University (Green 2000). However, it is very clear that the participation targets (which could easily be reversed if there was a change of Government) cannot be attained by encouraging more students to attend a traditional full-time university course at 18. This country could not afford the additional infra-structure necessary or the university teachers required to implement such a policy although, naturally, traditional full-time face-to-face universities are using the widening participation policy to argue for additional resources. What is obvious to us is that the target can only be met by a combination of a huge increase in part-time participation and in areas of the curriculum, which are either work-based or work-related. Our paper describes *Learning to Care*, an initiative in Cambridgeshire where a College of Further Education, which is a Centre of Vocational Excellence for Health and Social Care, the Open University School of Health and Social Welfare in the East of England Region, are working together to develop progression routes in the area of Health and Social Welfare. This is looked at within the broader context of the experiences the Open University has in widening participation through the National Open Learning Diploma in Social Work and the framework of distance learning and work-based education (and by the use of distance or blended learning methods).

## CONTEXT

Despite much activity to widen participation in HE, both within the Open University and outside, research suggests that people from low socio-economic groups still perceive HE as out of their reach. In the recent Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) report "Paving the Way" (2002), those students on vocational programmes (who are often from low socio-economic groups with low previous educational qualifications and without a family/peer history of participation) were identified as being particularly disadvantaged as they were "less well-informed about the HE option and lacked a long-term vision for their education and employment". This is especially true of the health and social care sector in the UK, which is also characterised by low paid work (often in isolated care settings) and low aspirations. Raising aspirations and providing entry and appropriate progression routes amongst this group is therefore key to achieving the government's target of 50% participation but, more importantly, offers individuals real opportunities to re-evaluate their skills and options for education and work.

The Learning to Care initiative seeks to meet the Open University's target of increasing the recruitment and retention of students from these groups studying with the OU (see Widening Participation Strategy (2001-2004). The initiative aims to raise aspirations and aid progression by working with students to develop vocational and work-based learning routes to HE and at the same time, where appropriate, linking these to opportunities for career development in the sector. The partner Further Education (FE) College draws students from areas identified as "cold spots" for HE participation, that is to say they are less likely to apply to study at HE level than students in other geographical locations. This group of students is particularly disadvantaged not only by virtue of their socio-economic status and educational experience but also by their geographical location.

The National Open Learning Diploma in Social Work Programme (NOLP) is a consortium of a range of seven organisations including Barnardos, a range of social services/social work departments and offers an open and work-based distance learning route to the professional award, the Diploma in Social Work, across the UK (with the exception of Northern Ireland). The first intake of students was in 1997 with a total of 31 students. Since then the Programme has expanded and by January 2004 had an intake of 991 students, 10% of the total provision of social work qualifying training across the UK. The Programme is managed by the Open University in partnership with the seven external agencies. Over 400 other agencies are involved as sponsoring employers. The Programme is delivered through a collaborative partnership where the OU provides the academic learning and assessment and the employer provides the practice learning through the placement requirement which is assessed by the Practice Teacher. The Programme identified and accessed a market of students which hitherto was not fully recognised and supported within the UK. This route to qualification appeals to mature students who would not necessarily contemplate social work training through more traditional routes, either because of financial or family/personal commitment that means they need to stay in employment. The Programme is especially aimed at those students who have limited formal and higher education and attainment and therefore may lack confidence in their ability to study. Many students also have considerable “hands on” experience but limited theoretical background to their practice. Comparison with the national profile of Diploma in Social Work students indicates that the NOLP attracts 10% more men than average and a high proportion of students working in residential care together with 6% more students from black and minority ethnic groups. The NOLP has succeeded in widening participation and increasing training opportunities for staff working in small voluntary and private organisations as well as those working in the statutory sector. It is important to note that the Programme is also attractive to employers because of its flexibility, accessibility and perceived value for money. It also fits within the framework of “grow your own” and investing in people policies.

Learning and skills development in the health and social care sector is a major area of concern nationally and regionally. Comments at a recent higher education seminar suggested that an estimated 17,500 staff need NVQ level training to comply with qualification demands by 2005 and an estimated 1500 managers need to achieve NVQ level 4 or the Registered Managers Award. Flexible work-based or distance learning is most suited to many of the potential learners in this area for the same reasons it is attractive to potential social work students. The National Health Service has an objective to improve opportunities for the professional development of its staff. The major trades union in this sector, UNISON, is also keen to support workers to step onto the “skills escalator”. These issues make the sector ripe for development of flexible and professionally relevant HE qualifications. The work based Pre-Registration Nursing Programme was developed and introduced in the Open University in 2002 to meet widening participation objectives to increase training opportunities for those staff working in health care organisations. As well as being as attractive to students as the NOLP, the Pre-Registration Nursing Programme aims to offer significant benefits to employers through contributing to recruitment and retention by opening new progression routes, providing cost effective work based education and training savings over traditional routes to Nurse Registration, developing flexible practitioners in the local workforce and by providing opportunities for qualified staff to develop their mentoring skills.

The frameworks for the Learning to Care Project and programmes supporting work based learning become part of the broader philosophy of a “learning organisation” which creates a culture where learning is valued and properly integrated and supported throughout the organisation. Studies have shown that developing this learning culture is a key determinant of success (Kelly 2003). It is also a challenge to the traditional “teacher-centred” approach and introduces the notion of continual learning, or life long learning. The element of work based learning can also bridge the gap between traditional campus delivery and the development of on-line learning in distance education. The programmes and project referred to in the paper have all valued the work place as an important learning environment and not just the setting where learning is taking place. The notion of “grow your own” qualified staff reflects the early Investor in People policies of the UK government. The student’s previous and current work experience facilitates the link between theory and practice, work based and academic knowledge, and supports them in questioning their own practice and if appropriate, challenging the practice and culture of their organisation. The work base is also regarded as having a greater capacity to provide a range of different learning environments, including different user groups and types of services. The Diploma in Social Work requires students to undertake placements and this provides an opportunity for work colleagues and managers to contribute to student learning in their role of work-place supervisors, practice teachers and practice assessors. There is also the opportunity for service users to be involved with both the teaching and learning as well as curriculum development. An aspect of this type of social work education which does not appear in other forms of provision are the incongruities which emerge. These are often in relation to the role undertaken, for example when students experience overlapping roles as employees and students, ensuring confidentiality for learning needs at the same time sharing knowledge with employers so they may contribute to the professional development of the student, or when students may be strong on experience but weaker on academic experience. These incongruities model the incongruities endemic to social work practice and as such provide valuable learning opportunities.

Opportunities are also available for innovation in methods of delivery, in particular interdisciplinary and inter-professional learning. On the introductory course of the social work programme and the UNISON (a major UK Trades Union) groups, students are further supported through face-to-face workshops. This enhances the distance learning and also provides an important link for students who still perceive the traditional face-to-face model of teaching as the most effective. Thus a blended model of learning is developed in direct response to the needs and wishes of the students.

Within the Learning to Care Project discussions with students on the vocational courses at Cambridge Regional College demonstrated an awareness of Higher Education but did not reveal an immediate desire to participate. The majority of the students involved were under the age of 25 and the Open University was seen by them as catering to an older population of students. This is an issue of particular concern to the Open University as it strives to make its curriculum and approach more attractive to younger people. Indeed it is doing this with some success and predictions are that around 20% of Open University Students will be under the age of 25 by the year 2006. The FE students had identified very clear pathways for their learning and saw HE as a possibility for the future but not one to which they had given a lot of consideration. It was interesting to note that parallel to this work students who were being recruited from within two work place settings to an introductory course in health and social care were more positive about accessing HE. For them their vocational experiences had left them with little or no qualifications and this was an opportunity to fulfil, what for some were life long, ambitions. Their circumstances meant they were unable to access more traditional

routes to gain a qualification. However the open access of the Open University meant that their lack of further educational experience was not a barrier to their participation. In both groups the rationale behind employers recruiting to the introductory course was to use it as a pre-selection process to progress on to either the social work programme or Pre-Registration Nursing programme.

Much of the research has illustrated the importance of information and guidance, confidence building and support for students in making the decision to enter HE and also during the transition period. These findings have some consistency with those of the UCAS report, Paving the Way, and the Open University's own retention project. (Implementing the Strategy 2002). Within the particular occupation settings experience of students has confirmed that effective early support systems can be crucial to improving progression rates. Work with the partners of both the Learning to Care Project, the Diploma in Social Work and UNISON has shown that the support of employers is vital in encouraging people from our target groups to enter HE work-based learning programmes of study. Continued employer support is also central to ensuring students' successful completion of the courses they are studying.

Recruitment and retention of students are two issues that need to be considered in parallel. Most students in the work based groups experienced high levels of anxiety in the early weeks of the course, as they familiarised themselves with not only the course content but also the Open University systems and processes, as well as the demands of studying. Students expressed concern over a wide range of issues including:

- the large amount of reading required and prioritising the reading to prepare for assignments
- balancing the demands of their private lives (and for some the demands of their workload)
- allocating study time and developing study skills and a study pattern that worked for them individually.

The evaluation of employment based courses in social work compare favourably to other types of social work programmes. Key results of courses to date include: high rates of attendance and completion on time of required work, high course completion rates; high pass rates for individual courses, assessed practice and the formal qualification; and retention of staff after graduation with rapid progression where possible to post qualifying learning (Unison-forum, 2004)

## **SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

Working together in partnership is a challenge and this paper assumes that the experiences of the projects discussed are in no way unique to the Open University. Demonstrating partnership working is a pre-requisite for many government funded initiatives which reflects the move to inter-professional learning. However, it is important not to underestimate the time involved nor the importance of having a shared understanding and model of effective collaboration. We would argue strongly for a student centred approach to collaborative working where there is a shared responsibility between employers and higher education for meeting student needs within the broader context of the health care and social work sector.

The project and programmes discussed all produce issues which need to be considered. A big challenge is to moderate balancing the recruitment needs of employers with individual learners' needs and professional aspirations for the longer term. Meeting the learning needs of students and enabling the student role whilst maintaining service delivery and minimising pressures on colleagues is particularly demanding in professions that are undergoing constant change. As with any academic programme the individual learning needs of students need to be considered whilst maintaining manageable workloads for both teachers in the workplace and tutors.

It is hoped that issues raised in this paper can inform discussion and facilitate the sharing of experiences and learning from across the Commonwealth. Questions from a UK perspective include:

- How to encourage smaller organisations to participate in work-based learning?
- How can partnerships with higher education institutions meet the needs of diverse student groups and organisations which reflect a wider cultural diversity than the academic institution?
- Are we right in our thinking that work-based and work-related education can provide a more direct route to widening the participation of underrepresented groups in higher education?
- What is the experience of others?
- What are the attitudes of employers to the use of work-time for study and to the use of equipment e.g. PCs?
- Can we really expect employees (e.g. nurses and health care workers) to study small chunks of materials during their coffee and lunch breaks- a possible model for the UK National Health Service University?

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