



Fife and Tayside Wider Access Forum

FE to HE Transition Scoping Exercise – Report

Author – Michael Allardice

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1. Acknowledgements

This exercise has allowed me to speak to many different people in the field of widening access and lifelong learning. I would like to thank them all for their time and cooperation. Particular thanks go to the Fife & Tayside Wider Access Forum for their funding and for the support of Wilma Clark and Anne Petrie. My colleagues in the Centre for Learning & Teaching are also due credit for their help and for picking up the slack I've left while the Access Summer School has been running. While many have helped shape my thinking, all comments, conclusions and errors remain solely my responsibility.

2. Introduction

This study was commissioned by the Fife & Tayside Wider Access Forum to examine potential gaps in provision of support for students making the transition from further to higher education in the Fife and Tayside regions and to find examples of best practice from other parts of Scotland which might be applied to this area. It has never been the intention of this study to assess or evaluate any of the existing programmes running in the FE or HE sectors. During the conduct of this scoping exercise, it has become apparent that progress in developing the transition from FE to HE has a great deal more to do with institutional and Forum policy development rather than the provision of individual programmes.

It was intended to be a short-term study, lasting approximately the equivalent of three-weeks of full-time work over the early part of summer 2006.

2.1 Context of FE in Fife & Tayside

The Fife and Tayside areas cover a large geographic and demographic spread. One particular feature of this region is the strength of the further education sector. Dundee College had 22,895 registered students in 2004. Fife College and Glenrothes College, now Adam Smith College, had a combined student population of 20,395 in 2004. While the other colleges in the region: Angus, Elmwood, Lauder, and Perth Colleges, had a combined student population of 30,740. In total, the 2004 FE student population in Fife & Tayside was 74,030, compared with 59,970 in the North East of Scotland, and 47,875 across Edinburgh and the South East. Only the Greater Glasgow region had a larger student population for further education colleges, but it also has significantly more colleges.

These Colleges are providing a significant level of higher education within their institutions - 8,725 students in the Fife & Tayside areas in 2004 - as well as sending large numbers of students on to the local universities. A few students move to universities beyond Fife & Tayside (mainly Edinburgh), but, in general, most will focus on entry to the following institutions:

- University of Abertay
- University of Dundee
- University of St Andrews

(All figures from: Scottish Executive publications website, *Further Education in Scotland 2004*)

2.2 Types of Transition from FE to HE on Offer

Each Higher Education Institution (HEI) has developed links with one or more of the colleges in the area and a number of programmes are directly accredited by an HEI, for example, the BA in Administration Management offered at The Adam Smith College and validated by the University of Abertay, which allows students to continue studying in

Kirkcaldy while progressing from the HND to the degree in a seamless fashion. Many of these larger colleges have similar programmes on offer to students and it would seem that the transition from Higher National Qualification (HNQ) to degree in these circumstances is straightforward.

Links between the colleges and HEIs often also allow advanced entry on to particular degree programmes from named HNQs through 'articulation agreements' between the FE/HE institutions. In general, these arrangements work well allowing students to move from one institution to another with the assurance that there ought to be some understanding of their educational background when they enter the HEI. Articulation agreements can be difficult to maintain but there are designated staff who are responsible for reviewing these arrangements in most institutions.

Problems of alignment between FE/HE courses tend to occur most frequently when a student is using an HNQ to enter a degree course which is not directly related to their previous studies. Thus, the transition from one institution to another is about the subject specific transfer as well as the cultural transfer that the student has to undergo.

2.3 Defining FE to HE Transition

In section 2.2 I outlined a few of the forms of transition which are known to occur from FE to HE. It is difficult to define of what the FE to HE transition involves. As one colleague suggested to me:

Perhaps the biggest problem is that there is a culture of regarding all College students as further education students and quickly losing sight of the fact that they happen to study higher education in an FE environment. Therefore, the transition should/could be thought of as FEI to HEI, thereby focusing on the academic and culture shock of a change of environments. (contribution from the FATWAF College/University Transition - Workshop 17 May 2006, Dudhope Castle)

Essentially, there appear to be three forms of transition taking place from further to higher education:

1. The transition from National Qualifications (NQs or SVQs) to HNQs, normally within a college;
2. HNQs to first year entry of a degree programme, which normally entails a move from college to university, although not in every case as mentioned in section 2.2;
3. HNQ to advanced entry on a degree programme. For example, Lauder College's HND in Human Resource Management can give direct entry to the third year of the BA in Human Resource Management at Napier University.

Each of these transitions presents different issues for the students and institutions involved. It is important to recognise the differences in these transitions, because each presents its own challenges. For example:

1. Moving from an NQ to an HNQ involves the student in considerable adjustment in the level and style of study. Tutors will expect a great deal more of their students while the students may well be moving from part-time to full-time study at the same time. Often, the students making this transition are also in employment and require these qualifications for career advancement. This also applies to those moving from HNQ to degree within the same College. The positive aspect of this change is that the environment remains unchanged;
2. The change from HNQ to first year entry of a degree is the transition most commonly associated with the move from FE to HE. With this transition comes a new social environment, a new learning culture, and a significant change in personal circumstances, including funding;

3. Finally, the transition from FE into the second or third year of a degree course is probably the most dramatic of all those described. It involves all of the changes identified in the previous point, as well as the student trying to become familiar with the prior learning their new colleagues have undergone in the previous years' of student on the degree. These students also have to find ways of negotiating entry into already well-established social networks among their fellow students. Social isolation can be one of the debilitating features of a students' experience of higher education.

3. Methodology

This study has been conducted through discussions with colleagues across institutions and also via searches for literature and publicity materials on the Internet and from the institutions themselves. While some information might have been missed, I have tried to place myself in the shoes of a student wanting to make the transition from FE to HE or from college to university. Therefore, while information might be 'available', equally it might be very difficult for the non-expert to access. This study was only intended to be funded for a short period which meant that the ability to conduct a comprehensive study was limited.

4. Existing Provision in FATWAF

Each of the colleges and universities within the FATWAF region organises some form of provision for those students moving from one form of study to another. For example:

4.1 College Based Activities:

- **Adam Smith College** has a full range of Access Programmes leading on to further study in the College and at other institutions. It also has both formal and informal Articulation Agreements with many HEIs across central Scotland. The College also offers a number of degree courses which can be

studied locally and are accredited by local universities from Edinburgh, Fife and Dundee.

- **Angus College** has various Access Programmes with some element of preparation for higher study. It also has both formal and informal Articulation Agreements with Abertay University, Robert Gordon University and University of Dundee.
- **Dundee College** has a comprehensive range of Access Programmes as well as formal and informal Articulation Agreements with a number of universities. Particular mention should be made of the webpage they have detailing progression routes for potential students taking them from Standard Grades through to Degree Programmes.
- **Elmwood College** has a number of programmes which could take students on to further study. In particular, it has an NC Access to Degree Programme which guarantees entry to either the University of St Andrews or University of Dundee in Arts and Social Sciences or an interview for a place on the BEd. Primary Education.
- **Lauder College** has an extensive range of Access Programmes, many of which are run through Scottish Wider Access Programmes (SWAP). It also has both formal and informal Articulation Agreements with a number of universities including those based in Edinburgh. The College also offers a number of degree courses which can be studied locally and are accredited by local universities from Edinburgh, Fife and Dundee.
- **Perth College** offers a number of Access Programmes and as part of the University of the Highlands and Islands Millennium Institute (UHI) can give students entry to a wide range of Degree Programmes.

- **SWAP East** - Successful completion of a SWAP Programme guarantees a place at a college or university on an HNC/HND or degree course. SWAP is a partnership of colleges and universities throughout Scotland. Its role is to promote access to higher education for mature students. SWAP (the Scottish Wider Access Programme) is dedicated to providing opportunities for adults with few or no qualifications to access higher education. Some adults may not have the formal qualifications for entry into college or university but can provide the energy, enthusiasm and commitment to gain access to a higher education course. (Text taken from the *SWAP Website*: http://www.scottishwideraccess.org/new_swap_site/more.htm)

Alongside these particular courses and pathways, all of the colleges offer SQA Highers to prospective students which will also allow them to apply for entry to any university on successful completion. The difference is that there is little preparation for the next level of study included in these courses.

4.2 University Based Activities:

- **University of Abertay**, Dundee, offers a Transition Course for students entering from further education. It is also involved in providing advice to students in Colleges before they apply to higher education.
- **University of Dundee** offers a Transition Course for students entering from further education. It also has been working in partnership with Dundee College on two on-line and classroom-based programmes called KNOTS/BOLTS which are intended to give students on selected HN programmes some insight into studying at Degree level.
- **University of St Andrews** does not appear to have any specific arrangements for students making the transition from FE, but does offer support to all of its non-traditional entrants through its Access Office and Student Support Services.

Each institution offers programmes tailored to specific groups it feels it has a particular obligation to, namely, students from the local college

where there is a strong set of connections. This presents the danger that other students may be missed during the selection process or disadvantaged because they do not have prior knowledge or experience.

5 Projects Running Elsewhere in Scotland

A number of projects are in existence in Scotland which might be interesting to consider in the context of this study. Overall, it is reasonable to suggest that, just as in the Fife and Tayside region, each institution has organised the transition from FE to HE in the way it believes suits its particular needs. Two projects are, I think, of greatest interest to those in Fife and Tayside:

1. **Next Steps** programme at the University of Paisley. Due to its success and the numbers attending it, this project has received considerable attention recently. In essence, it is a generic programme of study for students entering the University of Paisley from further education Colleges which runs during the summer in the evenings. Similar programmes are available in the FATWAF area, but they tend to run in short blocks during the day, whereas Next Steps is an evening programme. For a fuller description of Next Steps see: Knox, 2005, 'Making the Transition from Further to Higher Education: The Impact of a Preparatory Module on Retention, Progression and Performance', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, Vol. 29, No.2 pp103-110.
2. **UDecide** project funded by the West of Scotland Wider Access Forum. This project is interesting because it was aimed at providing guidance to students about to make transitions at a variety of levels. It provided workshops as part of an on-going programme of guidance to students about to transit from community to FE as well as the FE to HE. The emphasis of this programme was at early intervention rather than the majority of Transition Programmes which intervene after the student has made a decision about where they are headed next. This project also had a strong element of Staff Development for both FE and HE

staff. For further information see the evaluation Report: *The Decision Making and Student Progression in Transition Project*, Final Report: March 2006, West of Scotland Wider Access Forum.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

Each of the above mentioned projects provides a new insight to the basic issue of how to provide for the transition from FE to HE. The Next Steps programme aims to introduce students to higher education over a longer time-period than most transition courses to, by being a part-time evening course. UDecide focuses on the student before they have made a final decision about where they are next headed on their educational journey. This level of guidance emulates a project which was previously conducted in Fife Colleges under the auspices of the Fife Wider Access Project (FWAP), which provided 'enhanced guidance' to students in FE who were unsure about their future path. The most attractive element of the UDecide programme is the staff development aspects of it, bringing together colleagues from across the spectrum of FE and HE and not just those already involved in widening participation in each institution. In highlighting these two projects from elsewhere, I am suggesting that the Fife & Tayside Wider Access Forum look at ways in which it can engage member institutions in broader activities than are presently being conducted.

It is evident that there is much good work already taking place in the Fife and Tayside Wider Access Forum. A key feature for potential students is the quality and level of information easily available to them. The *Stepping Higher* booklet is a very helpful source for students in FE thinking about the next step, but it needs to be used in conjunction with other guidance to become really effective. One example of this is the SCQF booklet *Making the Change from College to University*, which provides readers with a very good step-by-step guide to entry to higher education.

Each institution is good at providing some form of 'cultural' transition activity, but much of this is aimed at those who wish to or are able to

volunteer to take extra time to come on these courses. Integrated provision of transition activities during the first few weeks of term would be potentially even more useful, but this presents problems of timetabling and resources when dealing with much larger groups of students. It would also be worth considering how FE students entering HE can be supported in the longer term, possibly through mentoring programmes or other initiatives which help them to develop a sense of belonging, particularly for those entering advance level study at University.

Staff development, as previously highlighted, is another important aspect of the FE to HE Transition. A greater emphasis on informing all members of academic and support staff about the differences and needs of students coming from FE may be helpful in reducing the barriers students often feel they face coming into higher education.

One of the features of the discussions I have had with colleagues while conducting this study has been the reliance of all institutions on a very small group of people to keep present provision running. In FE Colleges and the Universities the task of providing transition activities as well as widening access and participation initiatives has fallen to individuals with a very strong commitment to this sector of the educational agenda. This is interesting given the level of political momentum there has been in the last few years to further participation level. The danger of this policy is that the removal of just a few individuals across the whole of the FATWAF region could see present provision fall dramatically. Likewise, the pressure to increase activity in widening access, participation and the FE/HE Transition fields almost always falls on the shoulders of the same small group of people. Institutions across the sector need to invest more in this area, both in financial and human resource terms. In one discussion I had, the term 'organisational learning' was used to describe the way in which FEIs and HEIs grow in an area such as this. The problem is that much of that organisational learning will be lost if just a few members of staff move elsewhere and programmes may be lost as well.

7 Proposals

The two courses highlighted in section 5 might be suitable for one or more institution in FATWAF to investigate, but more importantly, I propose that the Forum look at the aspects of Staff Development in the UDecide programme as something that could be developed across all institutions in the area. Not only would this allow for the exchange of ideas but, more importantly it ought to bring colleagues into contact with those who have had little knowledge of the impact of FE to HE Transition on students and its importance to the whole agenda of widening participation in higher education.

Secondly, I propose that the Forum find ways of improving the quality of information available to students making the move from FE to HE. The *Stepping Higher* booklet is an important document, but needs to be supported with other material such as: *Making the Change from College to University*. Moreover, guidance staff need to be aware of all the options available to students.

Thirdly, the Transitions Management Board of the Forum should become more pro-active in co-ordinating all FE to HE Transition activity within the Forum. While each institution has to remain responsible for its own provision that provision ought to be considered in the wider context of the needs of the whole region.

Finally, I remain concerned that much FE to HE Transitions activity depends on just a few individuals and would not exist but for their personal commitment. Institutions must move this agenda further up the priorities list and provide the appropriate level of resources to enable full coverage and backup to be available. The Forum Executive consists of senior decision-makers in both FE and HE, they must reflect that level of support within their own institutions in order for these activities to continue in the long-term and eventually become part of the mainstream.

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