

The value of NAB provision in supporting non-formal learning and its contribution to widening participation.

Despite living in the 21st century we are still light years away from achieving equality in relation to participation in Higher Education. Those in the highest socio-economic groups are 7 times more likely to enter HE than those in the lowest group (1). The UK government and the Welsh Assembly have recognized this inequality and have developed a raft of initiatives aimed at encouraging higher rates of participation amongst social classes 1V and V.

However the issue of mature-aged entry and participation should not disappear behind the government's concern with young undergraduates. We know that there are less adult learners in the system in Wales than in any region in England and that amongst the least skilled and most economically disadvantaged groups participation rates have barely increased from 26% to 28% for the five year period 1996-2001 (2). After the enthusiasm which greeted the development of Access course provision in the '80s, there is a danger that FE and HE providers regard the mature market as 'spent' focusing their attention on developing closer links with schools. This could leave some of the most disadvantaged groups with no easy access to education at a time when the need to upskill and provide learning opportunities for the adult population has never been greater.

The HE sector in Wales has developed considerable expertise in working with groups who have traditionally been underrepresented and for whom the more formal educational provision is inappropriate. Non-formal learning programmes were developed through the HEFCW funded *non-award bearing, non-accredited continuing education* provision which provided structured learning leading to clear outcomes. The programmes aimed to be non-threatening, flexible and responsive to the needs of the learners. Much of the provision was innovative, even daring, in relation to the modes and styles of learning, opportunities for a curriculum that was negotiated with community groups and potential learners and the individual support and guidance provided. The essential feature of the provision was that it was community based. The provision was predicated on the understanding that community regeneration forms part of the remit of Higher Education and that, to be successful, it is a process of engagement with people.

The potential value of non-formal (i.e. non-accredited) learning in widening access to Further and Higher Education has been well-researched. Veronica McGivney and others have argued convincingly for the value of learning programmes targeted at non-participating groups. She suggests that to be successful the following characteristics are required:

- Located on familiar territory (many unemployed men have been found to be reluctant to travel outside of a 1-mile 'comfort zone')
- Venues should be open, welcoming and informal and staffed by people who reflect the composition of the local population

- The course timings and delivery style should be as flexible as possible
- The size of teaching groups should be small
- The initial curriculum should include ‘safe subjects’ (stereotypical male and female subjects) or include elements with which people feel familiar and that there should be opportunities for the curriculum to be learner-centred “allowing groups to express their interests and participate in discussions about the kinds of activities that are organized for them encourages them to set their own learning agenda and gives them a sense of ownership which produces commitment to a programme” (3)

Many of the above features are challenging, if not impossible, to provide within the usual HE context. Departments of Lifelong Learning therefore utilized opportunities afforded them by the non-award bearing (NAB) programme to develop very different types of provision specifically targeted at groups which had been traditionally under-represented or excluded from HE. Although the provision was characterized by considerable diversity across the seven HE institutions involved in the delivery in Wales, it was also largely underpinned by six main principles:

- Targeted activity with those deemed to be socially/economically disadvantaged
- The inclusion of client-centred educational guidance opportunities
- The development of strategic partnerships, including those with voluntary/community organizations
- Opportunities for progression to accredited levels of HE
- The maintenance and promotion of Welsh-medium provision

The provision contrasted with that offered by FE in that it sought to develop a curriculum which was not strictly instrumentally vocational. It aimed to assist learners on a path of personal, social and community development. New concepts of citizenship and learning entitlements were absorbed into the thinking of providers.

Student progression was always a vexed question and one which came to the fore during the all-Wales evaluation of the provision undertaken by consultants on behalf of HEFCW in 1999. During this exercise the providers argued that if they were accurately achieving their target group, that is those learners who as a result of previous negative experiences of the compulsory education system are often the most alienated from education, progression was unlikely to be directly into traditional full-time HE in the first instance. More likely, and perhaps more appropriately, may be the ‘climbing frame’ as distinct from ‘ladder’ analogy which perceives learners as firstly participating in confidence-and

motivation-raising activities before progressing into various forms of FE or LEA provided provision and who may emerge at a later stage in degree level HE. However this sort of progression is notoriously difficult to track, particularly as it involves different sectors and variable time-frames. It is also insensitive to other, arguably equally positive, outcomes such as paid employment, voluntary work or increased involvement in the community.

The innovative nature of the NAB programmes appeared to both impress and sometimes perplex the evaluators in 1999 and remains a dominant feature of the provision at the present time. Much of the activity takes place in family and community centers where, for example, groups of mothers will be relating aspects of their own lives to broad conceptual frameworks while their children play around them. Issues of what is and what is not HE emerge and the role and responsibility of HE institutions in actively supporting disadvantaged individuals and communities requires definition and articulation with other institutional strategies. The provision has always been innovative, flexible and diverse but does not fit tidily into mainstream university structures.

As Widening Participation has become a government priority HEIs have, to a large extent, reviewed and mainstreamed their strategies. It is no longer considered appropriate to maintain discreet projects which, however worthwhile in themselves, do not impact onto the overall institutions activities and culture. However many of the unique features of the NAB provision warrant recognition and there is a wealth of expertise often tucked away within HEIs which could be called into service in support of successful widening access strategies.

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1 DfES, Participation Index for Higher Education by Social class, 1999

2 NIACE Adult Learners Survey 2001

3 McGivney *Working with Excluded Groups*, p9