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PROMOTING BEST PRACTICE IN EQUALITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN SCOTLAND

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LIFELONG LEARNING AND EQUITY IN SCOTLAND

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Introduction

This briefing paper reports on the first event held as part of a knowledge exchange programme supported by the Scottish Funding Council, led by Professor Sheila Riddell, University of Edinburgh and Professor Nick Watson, University of Glasgow. It took place in Edinburgh on 13 November 2008 and was attended by an invited audience which included policymakers, an HR manager, FE practitioners, HE academics and PhD students. The event consisted of six presentations, discussions of these presentations and a final plenary led by a discussant.

One of the aims of the session was to provide a briefing with a state of the art assessment of the current picture and key issues affecting Scotland in relation to lifelong learning. A briefing paper (http://www.docs.hss.ed.ac.uk/education/creid/NewsEvents/16ii_PublicPolicySeminar_BriefingPaper.pdf) was produced prior to the event and circulated to all who had been invited. This second briefing paper summarises the presentations and sets out some of the issues and challenges for lifelong learning in Scotland

An overview of the presentations

The first three presentations drew on recently completed research studies and presented empirical findings in relation to different aspects of lifelong learning.

Presentation 1: Experiences of non-traditional students in an ancient Scottish university by Lyn Tett and Viv Cree, University of Edinburgh

Overview: This study examined the experiences of a group of HNC/D students who progressed from further education into an elite university. The researchers focused on transition into an elite institution as entry requirements into this type of institution are often problematic for this group of students. The study followed two cohorts of students over a total period of six years. It used questionnaires and interview data.

Key findings:

- The majority of the students transferred onto vocational educational or social subject courses with few moving into courses such as law and arts and none into the sciences; the majority were female, white and just over half were aged 21-40. Students found it difficult to self identify in terms of class but one third stated they were middle class and this was most common amongst younger students
- Transitions: the FE environment was generally more supportive but a small number of students appreciated the opportunity to take more responsibility for their own learning. Students' learning identity was challenged as they found it difficult to understand the academic standards required in HE and they needed to learn how to access support proactively
- Belonging: many of the students felt they did not belong to the university and some found it difficult to balance student life in relation to domestic responsibilities

Key implication of this research:

- Institutions, particularly of this nature, need to take students' wider life into account and develop ways of supporting students to find a valid learner identity and a sense of belonging as this is crucial for retention
- Institutions need to develop methods of learning and teaching that support students, e.g. by using group work and give developmental feedback to students on assignments especially at an early stage but also throughout their period of study

Presentation 2: What motivates adults to return to education and what are their attitudes and experiences? A comparison of learners with different levels of previous qualifications by Elisabet Weedon, University of Edinburgh

Overview: This study was based on the findings of a survey of 1021 adult returners in Scottish educational institutions undertaking mostly accredited learning courses. The survey formed one aspect of an EU 6th framework funded project examining the contribution of the education system to lifelong learning. The presentation focused on exploring the experiences of learners with no previous formal qualifications and contrasting these with other groups of learners. The group with no previous formal qualifications constituted around 8% of the total sample, tended to be older than the overall sample average and were more likely to be male.

Findings:

- These learners, as already noted in the literature, were more likely to have left school early to seek work, to have parents with no/low qualifications. They were most likely to be doing basic skills courses and to be studying in voluntary/local authority settings and further education
- Their overall attitudes to LLL did not differ to any extent from the rest of the sample
- They were more motivated to study for personal than job related reasons; though a relatively high proportion cited job related reasons; they were more likely to have been encouraged by another person or required to do a course to access benefits than other learners
- They were generally more positive about the learning process, find themselves in a more learner-centred environment and they valued the social aspects of learning to a greater extent than other learners. They were less likely to be involved in social and political activities than other learners, suggesting that engaging with learning offered an opportunity for building social capital
- Institutional setting impacted with those in a voluntary/local authority setting most positive about their experience

Key issues:

- The data suggests a tension between choice/autonomy on the one hand and pressure/external influences in relation to engaging learners with no previous formal qualifications in learning
- Progression from a nurtured safe environment 'the comfort zone' into further learning opportunities that provide more portable qualifications raises questions of how to turn educational achievements into labour market gains
- Social versus economic imperatives of learning – there is a need to recognise the value for non labour market gains, for example, the benefits of learning to health and well being

Presentation 3: Equity and Lifelong Learning in Scotland: Workplace development in SMEs by Sheila Riddell, Linda Ahlgren and Elisabet Weedon, University of Edinburgh

Overview: This presentation was based on work carried out for an EU 6th framework funded project examining the contribution of the education system to lifelong learning. It drew on two parts of this project: (i) the review of policies and practices in relation to lifelong learning, and (ii) a set of qualitative case studies of formal learning in SMEs in Scotland. Six case studies were undertaken and managers, line managers and employees involved in formal learning were interviewed. Three knowledge intensive companies and three medium skilled enterprises participated.

It stressed the important role of lifelong learning in the Scottish Government's economic policy and the emergence of access to workplace learning as an aspect of the new equality agenda. It identified a set of key questions/ongoing tensions:

- Should workforce development be seen as employer/state obligation – or should the market decide?
- Who should pay – the state, the employer or the individual?
- Who should decide nature of training – the state, the employer or the individual?

Key findings from the review of policies and practices:

- A high proportion of adults participate in formal education in the UK, probably due to the more flexible access to further and higher education in the UK compared to other European countries and also because a comparatively large number of younger people leave school without formal qualifications
- The UK is similar to other countries in that access to workforce development is unequally distributed; those with higher qualifications are more likely to get additional training and this is also the case in Scotland

Key findings from the case studies:

- Inequalities in access to formal learning were evident. In the knowledge intensive firms there was greater access to more portable training which was often driven by employees' ambitions and professional requirements. In contrast, the traditional manufacturing firms focused on employees getting the skills needed for the job and no more and employees were often less ambitious to move on
- All case studies had (at least to some extent) expansive approaches to learning as they encouraged both formal & informal learning and were therefore not typical of the average SME. However, in all the case study companies there was a suspicion of lifelong learning for its own sake – there was a perennial question from employers in relation to 'What direct benefit is this to the firm'?
- This scepticism needs to be factored in when developing policy measures aimed at encouraging the development of workforce learning
- The approach in Scotland has tended to be ad hoc, although clear requirements from institutions such as professional regulatory bodies, Scottish Commission for Regulation of care, HSE are in evidence

The next three presentations offered the policy perspective. The first examined the promotion of equality in Scotland's colleges and universities, the second provided the view of the Scottish Funding Council, and the third, from the commissioner for the EHRC discussed learning and life chances.

Presentation 4: Promoting equality in Scotland's colleges and universities by Suzanne Marshall and Linda McLeod, Equality Forward

Overview: Equality Forward has as its remit to support Scotland's colleges and universities in meeting the requirements of current equality legislation. It strives to support the creation of learning environments which are non-discriminatory, to create maximum opportunities for staff and students to participate and to ensure that equality is embedded in all aspects of their work.

The initial aim of the organisation was to ensure compliance with legislation and to help institutions develop their responses to legislation. The focus has now moved beyond compliance to consider ways of promoting equality with colleges and universities. The key areas that are seen as requiring attention are:

- The need to change campus culture
- The need to develop the curriculum and mainstream equality
- The need to collaborate with students and other stakeholders
- The need develop leadership and governance

The key challenges identified were encouraging a focus on multiple, rather than single, identity, the need to develop better equality data and to develop a better understanding of LGBT issues. There are also issues around gender segregation in particular disciplines and changes in demographics leading to an older population.

It was noted that equality officers favour moving towards a single equality duty and that institutions need to focus on outcomes and not just on outputs.

The key messages were that institutions needed to take a holistic and whole institution approach to equality and embed it in the '*DNA of the institution*'.

Presentation 5: Lifelong learning and equity in Scotland's colleges and universities by Jon Gray, Scottish Funding Council

Overview: The Scottish Funding Council is a non-departmental public body which distributes government funding to Scotland's colleges and universities. A key aim of the organisation is to offer fair access to a diverse range of learning programmes which are suited to individual learner's circumstances.

The main strategy for implementing access for all is *Learning for All*. This document provides an annual update on progress and focuses on broad challenges rather than the effectiveness of any particular SFC policy or strategy.

It measures more even **participation** by examining school attainment of pupils and participation rates in FE/HE from schools with the lowest participation rates. It also examines participation of mature students in both FE and HE by students from the most deprived areas. Data is also examined according to area, gender, ethnicity and disability.

It measures more even **demand** by looking at the proportion of More Choices More Chances (MCMC), the patterns of application for university places and the aspiration patterns among school leavers.

Findings – participation:

- Rates in HE and FE have been falling after an increase between 04/05 to 05/06 and the gender gap has increased with women accounting for 57% of FE and 54% of HE students.
- Students from deprived areas are more likely to participate at college and students from the most deprived areas have lower grades. Students from the most deprived quintile make just 10% of the university student population and are most likely to go to new universities (13.9%) rather than ancient universities (6.6%)
- There has been an increase in participation of disabled students with 10% of college students declaring a disability and 6.5% of university students
- The gap between the bottom quintile and the rest has widened in relation to progression to HE. School attainment is lower in publicly funded schools than in independent schools but the gap between boys' and girls' attainment is higher in independent schools. Students from a deprived area with lower prior attainment are most likely to drop out; those from the most deprived quintile are most likely to drop out but the rate has decreased slightly between 2003/04 and 2004/05

- There has been little change in the college retention rate of 86% although there has been a slight drop in the completion rate and a slight increase in the drop out rates
- Scotland's HEIs had the highest non-continuation rates among mature entrants in the UK in 2004/05 and the second highest for young entrants
- There is limited articulation between FE and HE as only a small number of students, just over 3000 students, entered their full-time first degree in second or third year with advanced standing

Attainment is strongly affected by socio-economic factors as pupils on free school meals, who have Record of Needs or are looked after by a social worker score an average 111 tariff points in school exams whilst those with none of these factors score an average of 185. Pupils with all of these factors score an average of 26 tariff points.

The funding council has been tackling this by developing a range of measures which include providing funding for MCMC school leavers (£3 million) and inclusiveness measures. It has also developed school/college partnerships, the BRITE initiative aimed at tackling complex needs and the Regional Access Forums. These have been used in schools to raise awareness and provide summer schools and in deprived areas with adults and young people.

The funding council is currently developing further initiatives through its New Access and Inclusion Committee, its National Schools Programme and through engagement with Community Learning and Development. It also aims to develop better national coordination.

A key issue is to use the monitoring and evaluation to achieve demonstrable impact; however, that depends on individuals who are most disadvantaged responding to the initiatives and engaging with learning.

Presentation 6: Learning and life chances by Ros Micklem, National Director for Scotland, EHRC

Overview: This presentation focused on the role of Scotland's colleges in creating a more equal Scottish society. It noted that colleges:

- have a strong record in including a range of learners from diverse backgrounds and from deprived areas
- have considerable reach in terms of geographic area, age range and different types of learning opportunities and have forged strong partnerships with other stakeholders

In spite of the excellent record of the colleges they still face challenges and the main ones are:

- who is it who can access the college and for what?
- do all learners have an equally good college experience?
- is there equality of outcomes, processes and autonomy?

Further challenges include an unrepresentative staffing profile, widening gaps in certain areas, blocks to learners' progression and issues around values in a sector that aims to be flexible and responsive. Finally an important challenge is to shift perception away from equality as a bureaucratic exercise to getting people to engage with it so that it can be mainstreamed.

Lifelong learning and equity in Scotland: some key issues

What more can be done by the Scottish Funding Council to ensure that higher and further education in Scotland becomes a vehicle for social transformation rather than reproduction of existing inequalities?

Scotland has the highest participation rate in higher education in Europe, but increasingly questions are being asked about equity issues in relation to the human and social capital benefits of study at different types of institution. The Scottish Funding Council has established an Access and Inclusion Committee to explore in some details which students have benefited from the expansion of further and higher education over the past decades, and what can be done to make the distribution of social, economic and personal development gains fairer.

What can elite institutions do to ensure the inclusion and success of 'non-traditional' students?

Students who come to university with vocational qualifications, most of whom are from less socially advantaged backgrounds, tend to have poorer degree outcomes and higher dropout rates. Research suggests that they are often blown off course by established approaches to learning which are taken for granted at university level, such as the expectation that students will seek out their own learning resources and take full responsibility for their own learning with minimal individual support. Students from non-traditional backgrounds may find it difficult to identify with other students and the institution, because of different economic and social experiences and expectations. For example, elite institutions often assume that students will be full-time with no extended family responsibilities and with no need for additional income from employment. Questions arise as to how elite institutions can change their ethos and mode of operation to foster a sense of belonging amongst non-traditional students, which is crucial for retention. The alternative assumption, adopted implicitly by many institutions, is that the onus to fit in with the prevailing cultural norms rests entirely with the student, but this has negative implications for fairness and is unlikely to produce much in the way of cultural change.

How is parity of esteem between vocational and academic qualifications to be achieved in lifelong learning systems?

The Scottish Government is committed to achieving parity of esteem between vocational and academic qualifications both in school and post-school systems. If this were achieved, benefits would almost certainly arise for students from less advantaged backgrounds. However, the means of achieving this goal are unspecified and at school levels there is much evidence that academic qualifications continue to enjoy much higher status amongst parents, teachers and children, and continue to be the gateway to the most prestigious courses at university. Given the differential economic returns for different types of qualification, what can lifelong learning systems do to promote vocational learning, and does this inevitably involve undermining the value of academic courses? Is it reasonable to maintain that all learning is of similar value? Is there a danger that certain pupils are steered towards vocational learning at the expense of a more general, broader education?

Given the very low financial returns for those with few or no initial qualifications, what is the best way of encouraging members of this group to become lifelong learners?

Official statistics show that those with lower levels of initial qualifications, generally from poorer backgrounds, are much less likely to participate in any form of post-school education, and receive lower economic returns for the qualifications which they obtain. Given this disincentive, questions arise as to what levers may be used by Government to encourage those with lower level qualifications into lifelong learning, and how these courses may provide better opportunities for social mobility, personal growth and the building of social capital.

What additional incentives are likely to encourage SMEs to become expansive learning organisations?

Research on SMEs shows that organisations in this sector are sceptical of the benefits of lifelong learning, unless there are clear benefits for company profitability. These attitudes are potentially at variance with the ambition of the Scottish Government to encourage a more expansive approach to workplace development, so that portable qualifications are more widely and fairly spread amongst the population. The Government also wants to introduce simpler and more consistent approaches to funding employee development. Questions therefore arise as to whether the Government should take a more proactive line in compelling or encouraging employers to support employees engaged in lifelong learning. Alternatively, should the Government divert more public funds into the resourcing of learning in the workplace?

Should FE and HE do more to support SMEs in becoming more expansive learning organisations?

Surveys of employers suggest that many feel that FE college leavers and HE graduates are well prepared for work; however, only a small proportion of employers use FE colleges for further training of employees and an even smaller proportion use HE. Is there a need for these learning providers to work more closely with employers in designing learning that suits their needs? Or is the role of these institutions to provide more broadly based general learning experiences, as well as providing employees with portable qualifications?

How can we make public sector equality duties a more effective means of achieving change?

Public sector equality duties are potentially a powerful instrument in terms of making post-school institutions operate more fairly for their staff and their students. However, there is a tendency for institutions to regard these as a bureaucratic exercise requiring minimal compliance. Questions arise as to what actions can be taken by the Government, the Equality and Human Rights Commission and individual institutions to make equality schemes instruments for social change. Do we need more carrots or more sticks?

What do we mean by equality and how can we encourage institutions to have an expansive, rather than limited, view of the concept?

The Equality and Human Rights Commission, in their equality measurement framework, promote a view of equality as pertaining to equality of process, autonomy and outcome. Until now, institutions and Government have focused attention largely on equality of access, and, to a lesser extent, equality of outcome. Questions arise as to what steps are necessary to educate people about the broader concept of equality promoted by the EHRC, and to encourage (or compel) them to promote a broader vision of fairness.

What are the implications of the human rights agenda for lifelong learning?

Whilst there has been a considerable body of work on the implications of the equality agenda for lifelong learning (although much of this has focused on social class issues), far less attention has been paid to the human rights agenda. At its core, this involves treating each individual with respect and dignity, and allowing everyone to achieve their full potential. What measures are needed in further and higher education to ensure that human rights concerns are addressed?

What should be the balance between economic and social gains of learning?

Policy documents emphasise human, social capital and personal development aspects of learning, however, funding mechanisms often favour human capital development. What is the role of education in allowing individuals to engage and develop social networks that can support them throughout their lives, even if these may not help some people to progress into employment? How might funding mechanisms be changed to allow a greater emphasis to be placed on the achievement of social goals, for example, helping people with mental health difficulties to engage in learning that will benefit them?

Further information

Further information about the project is available at <<http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/education/rke/centres-groups/creid/projects/knowledge-exchange>> or from Sheila Riddell, CREID, Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh, Holyrood Road, Edinburgh EH8 8AQ sheila.riddell@ed.ac.uk

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