

FE Transition: Easing Transition from Schools to Colleges

Executive Summary

Background

The Scottish Executive and the Scottish Funding Council for Further and Higher Education have identified three key areas for the Regional Wider Access Forums to tackle; communities; schools; and transitions.

The North Forum has undertaken work in the area of transitions (i.e. smoothing the transition into and between the different stages of post-compulsory education) for some time. This work started with the FE/HE Transition project, which ran in the North East of Scotland between 2002 and 2004 (for more information, see www.scotland-northforum.ac.uk). In 2004, the Forum decided that it should look beyond the area of the transition from Colleges to HEIs and agreed that the area of transition into and within Colleges should be investigated, with a view to identifying good practice and encouraging institutions to ensure that the transition was as smooth as possible, so that learners were as successful as possible.

A short life sub group was set up, with members from all of the Colleges in the Forum area. The sub group identified two priority areas for work; easing the transition from school to College; and developing the practice of independent learning. The Executive Group of the Forum agreed that these two areas of work should be pursued and the sub-group prepared specifications, which were distributed to all Forum partners for tenders. Aberdeen College was successful in bidding to undertake the project on easing the transition between schools and Colleges. This summary report outlines the outcome of that project.

The project examined arrangements between schools, local authorities, colleges and other interested bodies such as Careers Scotland throughout the whole of the North Forum area – from the Aberdeen in the east and south, to the Shetland Islands in the north and Eilean Siar (the Western Isles) in the west. The research identified the numerous, diverse factors which lead to a variation in access to college facilities for school pupils and access for school leavers to post school education across the North Forum region. Although many of the factors influencing pupil progression may not be unique to the region, the report highlights that it is the **combination** of these which plays a unique role in how pupils in the North Forum area may or may not be able to progress easily and comfortably to FECs.

Methodology

A range of strategies was adopted to source the material on which the project results were based. These approaches included

- desk-based research of paper and internet-based material from both within Scotland and beyond
- meetings with staff from schools, colleges, local authorities, Careers Scotland on an individual basis to explore policies, procedures and approaches towards easing the transition from schools to colleges
- focus meetings **between** school and college staff both from strategic and also operational levels within the institutions to discuss and examine the perception of the successful and less successful aspects of current transition arrangements
- questionnaires issued to schools, colleges and recent school leavers who had just entered FECs to gather perceptions of each of the effectiveness of current transition arrangements and seek suggestions of possible improvements.

Findings

For many years further education colleges (FECs) have been regarded as one of the possible progression routes from schools, especially for those wishing to pursue vocational qualifications or for those who did not attain sufficiently high grades to proceed to courses in higher education institutions (HEIs). More recently, with expectations and aspirations of pupils, parents and society being based on an emphasis of attaining degrees, the importance of the role that FECs can play in lifelong learning has frequently been underrated.

Colleges can and do play an important part in progression in post-school education and they have made strenuous and successful efforts to increase participation in their courses. In recent years the process of encouraging pupils to enter FECs has been made easier by the unitisation of many of the courses they deliver and the implementation of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF). These initiatives have clarified the content, level and notional effort required for individual units and courses. Thus pupils are able to progress with greater ease from schools to colleges and also, where appropriate, between courses and institutions without the need, in the majority of cases, to repeat previously-covered work or to undertake supplementary or 'bridging' courses.

However, despite the increasing numbers of pupils continuing their education beyond the compulsory years, there are still many who do not continue their studies nor enter employment and training. For these, and for many school leavers who would benefit from smaller teaching groups and strong advisory and support mechanisms, FECs offer a meaningful, if not always obvious, routeway to enhanced qualifications.

Diversity

Given that the area of the North Forum makes up over half the land area of Scotland, inevitably there is a range of factors which, within themselves, exhibit considerable diversity across the region. The landscape is one of contrasts between the broad coastal fringes of the Moray Firth and Buchan Plain and the mountains of the Grampians and North-West Highlands with limited routeways through and around them. There is the added dimension of numerous islands with their own linguistic characteristics languages and culture but with the requirement of fulfilling the training demands of the local economies and communities. These include the Orkney and Shetland Islands and the islands of Eilean Siar (the Western Islands). These factors contribute to the accessibility (or otherwise) of post-school education opportunities. In addition, the rural nature of much of the region, while offering opportunities for unique courses to be delivered, also reduces the viability of offering many practical courses. While social deprivation is generally of little significance over much of the area, some of the urban centres such as Aberdeen, Inverness and smaller settlements such as Fraserburgh and Peterhead have pockets of population displaying proportions of deprivation more usually associated with some of the poorer areas of Scotland. The report examines the diversity of secondary schools over the region, from those with rolls of over 1000 pupils to those with fewer than 200 pupils. Even in the size, roles and funding of colleges, considerable variations are identified with all colleges bar two being members of UHI Millennium Institute. While all colleges recruit from wide areas, including beyond Scotland, most depend on their immediate hinterland for a large proportion of their student body.

The Drivers

The report examines some of the major initiatives which have been launched to encourage participation in post school education with an emphasis being placed on progression to further education as part of the Scottish Executive's Lifelong Learning agenda. Attention is paid to the demands of a Curriculum for Excellence, Lifelong Partners – Scotland's Schools and Colleges Building the Foundations of a Lifelong Society, Determined to Succeed and Learning for All. The role the unitisation of courses over the last 20 years and the introduction of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) have played in clarifying a pupil's/student's level of prior qualifications is also recognised.

The Link Person

Most schools and colleges have a nominated person who liaises between sectors. In some cases the link person operates at a strategic level determining which courses be offered to particular groups of pupils. Some operate at operational or guidance level, supporting pupils and entrants in the experiential and transition processes. The report identifies the importance of such staff and the problems which may arise if such staff have not been appointed or their duties are ill-defined.

Progression from schools

The report contains a ranking of the progression rates from all secondary schools in the North Forum area to three different destinations viz. to further education, to higher education and to post school education. The possible causes for variations in the further education figures and post school education figures are analysed by considering the lowest and highest quintiles in each and the impact the factors of diversity and various government initiatives may have had on these rates.

Transition and progression to Colleges

The arrangements which colleges have currently in place to ease transition from schools to colleges is examined, both from the point of view of allowing pupils experience of college life while still at school and making entry to college courses welcoming and less stressful. The methods of publicising college provision are examined and the perception of the success and usefulness of these is examined from responses provided by schools and pupils based on findings from focus groups and questionnaires.

Other Wider Access Projects

Attempts to widen the experience of pupils to post school education are carried out throughout Britain. In Scotland, several well-established programmes have been in operation for many years. However, these have tended to concentrate on widening participation from under-represented groups in higher rather than further education. The work of LIFT-OFF, a project of the Fife and Tayside Wider Access Forum, and ASPIRENorth, a major project of the North Forum, are examined from the point of view of raising the profile of further education amongst pupils.

Recommendations

The report recommends that:

- 1. The concept of further education and its associated career and educational progression benefits be marketed by members of the North Forum.**

In the lifelong learner agenda society, parents and pupils perceive higher education as the preferred progression routeway for school leavers to ensure better employment prospects. Individual colleges have undertaken excellent and relatively successful marketing campaigns but the overarching concept of a 'further education' brand as a complementary and parallel routeway to post-school education with a range of qualifications and exit points could be enhanced with the support of the Forum.

- 2. The North Forum facilitate the creation of a portal on school websites to link to college websites in its area while colleges in the North Forum area develop a section on their websites collating information relevant to school leavers wishing to enrol on both non-advanced and advanced course. The information should contain contact names, telephone numbers and e-mail addresses of those who can supply information which may be useful to potential students from schools.**

For many pupils and their parents it can be difficult or off-putting approaching colleges or searching for information on college websites. The suggested developments might make it more obvious how to access information and by collating information under a 'schools' section' access to the main points of relevant information should be easier.

- 3. Information which would allow school leavers to make appropriate choices and which clarify relevant key issues be produced by each college. The information should be made available in a format – electronic or paper – with which school leavers may readily identify.**

Colleges already produce a plethora of information about themselves and their courses. However, much is in 'education speak' and not always in language most appropriate for school leavers. It is suggested that colleges endeavour to produce, without being patronising, suitably developed material with which school leavers can identify.

- 4. Colleges offer activities both within college and on school premises to allow pupils to gain experience and knowledge of elements of further education at an early age. If possible such activities should attempt to involve parents or guardians in order to provide information on opportunities for progression beyond school.**

Colleges already offer 'Open Days' which usually are information days. There also experiential visits for certain groups of pupils. It is suggested that colleges might run more 'fun learning days' for pupil groups even from primary school age to embed the concept of the provision and accessibility of further education. If parents can be involved in such activities there is a possibility the profile of further education may be raised further.

- 5. Further education colleges offer school staff the opportunity to visit colleges, receive information as regards college provision and inspect college facilities on information days. To reach as wide a range of colleagues as possible, it might be desirable for such sessions to be held on school in-service days.**

Many school staff offer pupils advice on their future plans both on a formal and informal basis. However, many of these staff members have little experience of further education or any experience they have may pre-date incorporation of colleges. School staff may not be aware of the range of courses and more especially the modern facilities currently found in FECs. Again the profile of further education might be enhanced if awareness of these facilities is widened.

- 6. It is recommended that colleges supply local authorities and schools each session with details of the key dates in their college calendar.**

School staff indicated that, with a lack of uniform structure between college calendars, they are often unclear as to the key dates in each college. In order to aid advisory services, a calendar of the key dates could be issued to schools – possibly via the local authorities.

- 7. Schools and local authorities attempt to align timetable formats to try to match pupil release with college availability. This might also enable pupils to attend college with minimal disruption to their study of school subjects. In addition colleges attempt to inform schools and local authorities at as early as is practicable of the availability of courses to allow a maximum number of pupils to benefit from the college experience.**

It is often difficult for colleges to accommodate pupils on experiential learning on their premises as, in most local authorities, there is no uniform school timetable pattern. This can also lead to pupils who attend college, many of whom are the less able, having to make extra efforts on their return to school to complete essential work missed on their college days. Although, because of staffing arrangements and availability of premises, it is often difficult for colleges to know well in advance what courses they will be able to offer and on what scale, schools are often informed at a very late date of the arrangements colleges are able to offer. This makes planning arrangements by schools difficult.

- 8. Examine the possibility of recruiting students as role models and mentors for potential and new students be examined. Where it is deemed feasible, run training courses possibly with college certification in mentoring skills. Use could be made of mentoring programmes already running in North Forum HEIs.**

Undoubtedly 'success stories' of students from a pupil's school or local community make any information supplied more relevant to pupils. Mentoring programmes in FECs may not be as easy to establish as in HEIs because many possible mentors attend college on a part-time basis or for one year only. However, there may be sufficient members of the student body willing to undertake training for, and implementation of, such a programme of support.

- 9. College staff who offer frontline training and advice to potential students should ensure that they are the known, named point of contact at the college for those who require additional support and encouragement to explore further training opportunities.**

Often, the most difficult part of the progression process is for pupils to approach a college. Often contact with colleges may appear to be impersonal with pupils being passed from one member of staff to another. If advice is provided by a member of college staff, they should ensure that the pupil is given their name and contact details so that any future approaches be more directed and personal.

- 10. Local authorities and colleges examine how they might collaborate in offering practical elements of qualifications more locally via shared resourcing.**

With the increasing emphasis on school-college partnership and collaboration and the introduction of Skills for Work programmes, there is often difficulty in providing sufficient places for practical training. Colleges may have the spare capacity in workshops to allow schools the opportunity of using these facilities – and perhaps staff – for the delivery of such courses.

Other Supporting Evidence

Accompanying the report are nine appendices supplementing the information of the main report. These include details of the consultation process, progression rates from the secondary schools in the North Forum area and an analysis of student perceptions of the 'recruitment' techniques of colleges. There is also a series of maps showing the recruitment base for each of the colleges in the Forum area.

Ten case studies of best practice are also included, covering topics such as school-college joint publicity, award-winning programmes of school-college links, the embedding of the concept of further education amongst school pupils from primary upwards, including the use of residential weekends and the use of college websites to offer integrated advice to school leavers and their parents.

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(This Executive Summary and the report are available to read at or to download from www.scotland-northforum.ac.uk)