



# Newsletter

## Editor's comment

In this issue you will find a report on the WVLLN's visit to the OU; a report from Ruth Waring, Progression Co-ordinator at the University of Bath on the LLN Progression Accord Workstrand Symposium; a brief synopsis from Kate Thomas, Progression Co-ordinator at UWE on the recent UALL conference; an update on the development fund and personal experiences as an adult learner approaching HE from Caroline Adelman, Progression/Strand Co-ordinator at the RAC.

The next issue will include details of which bids have been successful; a report on the recent visit of MPs to a local Swindon school and an update on the WVLLN from the Assistant Director Progression.

I would encourage you to visit our website where you can read more about what the team has been undertaking as well as feedback from recent conferences.

## WVLLN visit to the Open University



The Open University

On the 24<sup>th</sup> October various members of the WVLLN attended an awareness raising event at the OU Regional Centre in Bristol. This was an opportunity to hear from subject tutors as well as raising our awareness of the OU offer.

The presentations were extremely useful and some of the information we received surprised us. It was illuminating to hear that the median age of OU students is 32 and decreasing with a significant growth in the under 25 group. 75% are in full time employment with 44% having less than 2 'A' levels.

Interestingly, given the focus of the LLN in year 2 with AP(E)L, was the number of credit transfer awards for prior study which is 11,647 per year. Credit transfer is part of the OU site and is a free process. We

heard that the OU is beginning to introduce specific degrees as top ups for foundation degrees as well as a large range of professional and vocational qualifications.

With regards to employer engagement the OU are hoping to pilot a new 'open box' course which will offer 30 credits at L1 and involve 100 hours of engagement with learning materials. There is also the opportunity for accreditation of employer derived training which certainly fits in with the aims and objectives of year 2 for the LLN.

The OU also offer Open Learn which is a learning space with free materials available to learners across the world. This is funded through Hewlett Packard and has 1/2 million users across the world to date. In this area there are opportunities for learners to sample various opening courses, study skills as well as Level 1 tasters.

There is Lab space which is an area for educators with no licence fees or copyright where they can use materials as they are or adapt for their own use.

age. The only request is that if adapted they are put onto the site so others can learn from them.

The WVLLN is collaborating with the OU on a web resource which is currently being explored through a variety of focus groups made up of learners sourced through the progression team's contacts. So far three groups of learners have been consulted and the results from the consultation are being evaluated.

It was an extremely interesting day which we all enjoyed and would like to thank Meriel Lee Regional Director, the OU team and Associate lecturers for their time and hospitality.



## LLN Progression Accord Workstrand Symposium Ruth Waring, Progression Coordinator, University of Bath

On 23<sup>rd</sup> October I attended the LLN Progression Accord Workstrand Symposium at Birkbeck College which was organised by the Lifelong Learning Network for the East of England, MOVE. This event was well attended and provided an opportunity for LLNs from across the UK to share experiences about the process of developing progression accords and the associated successes and challenges.

In the morning, representatives from four LLNs gave presentations about the approach being taken to developing progression accords in their particular network. The presentations reflected a variety of different approaches from MOVE's use of additional student numbers to offer guaranteed places on level 4 courses for those coming via specific types of vocational level 3 courses, to the broad approach adopted by our own LLN

involving agreements which aim to ensure that the transferable skills embedded in a wide range of BTEC National Diplomas are fully recognised by universities at the application stage.

These presentations raised plenty of issues for discussion at the open forum which was chaired by Kevin Whitston from HEFCE. The afternoon began with a discussion around whether signed progression agreements are actually required! There was wide agreement that the process of developing the agreements is as important as the signed document. Overall, it was felt that the signed agreements are important in that they represent the commitment of institutions, and that there is the danger that any which are purely dependent on champions within the institutions may be lost once personnel move on.

There was a lively discussion around whether ASNs should be used to guarantee places. Supporters of this approach were clear that the Schwartz report stated that these kinds of arrangements can be justified if they improve access to HE for those from under-represented groups such as vocational learners.

In terms of more broad-based agreements, there was concern in some quarters that these may prove to be less effective than agreements aimed at particular level 3 and level 4 courses in the region, especially within the 3 year time frame of LLN initiatives. The point was made that it is not accurate to say that all vocational qualifications are appropriate to all HE courses—the useful part is the detailed work which looks closely at curriculum match.

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## My experience of Higher Education as an adult learner

Caroline Adelman Progression/Strand co-ordinator at the RAC

**A**s the focus of the WVLLN's second year is primarily on adult learners it was decided to present the personal experiences of being an adult learner both in the contemplation of, and then the entering into, higher education.

In a moment of inattention, I agreed to write a short biography for the WVLLN newsletter to introduce myself not only as the new Progression/Strand Coordinator at the Royal Agricultural College (RAC) focussing on Environment and Conservation but also as someone who has actually gone through a progression route. Where to start?

Much has happened in the 30 years since I left school with "O" Levels and a weak "A" Level. Society tended to encourage women to be either a nurse, a teacher or a secretary. I reviewed my options and ended up a secretary or in modern parlance an Executive Assistant!

In this role, I worked around the world in a variety of posts including sporting bodies, politics, industry and the United Nations, met some very interesting people and gained the ability to muddle through in several languages. But, something was always missing – I knew I could do more but was hampered by the lack of a degree.

In 2001, I wrote what can only be described as an email to several universities to ask what qualifications I would need to apply. I wrote because I was too shy to ring, go to careers counsellors or anyone else for that matter. Frankly, I thought the answer would be "no" and didn't want to hear it. I was wrong. All bar one rang for a "chat". However, the RAC asked me if I would like to come and see them. I didn't realise they were interviewing me - it was just a chat with a bit of lunch. Totally un-threatening, deeply encouraging and they were kind enough to offer me a place. I took it conditional upon the successful completion of three assignments – soil, animal reproduction and plant root systems.

That small email has today given me a BSc (Hons) from the RAC, an MSc from Cranfield, membership of a professional organisation and of the College. I am also continuing to study, having suffered withdrawal symptoms, for a PG Diploma in Countryside Management – to keep my hand in.

I suppose the message in this is "don't be too shy to try". There are people and organisations who are there to help not hinder you. Take the plunge. Do it.

## Development fund bids

The WVLLN are pleased to announce that there has been considerable interest in the development fund that FE colleges were invited to bid for. There have been 13 bids from several of the networks colleges with a variety of proposed outcomes.

After the bids have been assessed by members of the core management team they will be going forward to the assessment panel on the 11th December. Colleges will be informed of the results by the end of that week, with projects starting in the new year.

In the next edition of the newsletter we will be announcing which colleges have been successful.

### Upcoming Events

- 11 Dec—Assessment panel for the development fund bids, Oakfield Campus
- 12 Dec— Progression Co-ordinator team meeting, Oakfield Campus

## Progression Focus

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Those in support of a broader approach, which focuses on the notion of transferability, emphasised that it can bring more clarity and coherence for vocational learners. The danger of developing very specific agreements might be that they could pigeon hole vocational learners into a specific sector and, therefore, promote a much narrower range of options.

Other issues which were raised included: whether progression accords should be about identifying progression which already happens, or about developing new progression routes; the fact that more clarity about the funding of bridging modules would be welcomed and whether we are going to end up with network wide agreements across the UK.

During his summing up, Kevin Whitston told the audience that:

"After all these progression routes have been mapped, the important thing is what difference they make to vocational learners. What HEFCE wants to know is whether students are actually treading along these pathways! It's the quality of the agreements that matter."

(A full version of this report can be found on our website)

## UALL Conference jointly held with SUALL—report by Kate Thomas, Progression Co-ordinator UWE

**K**ate Thomas, WVLLN Progression Coordinator (based at UWE) recently attended the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL) Conference, held jointly with their Scottish partners (SUALL) at the Edinburgh College of Art.

Entitled Challenges for Lifelong Learning in the UK's Changing Demographic Landscape, the conference featured keynote speakers and workshops on a range of issues and topics. Demography was described as 'an uncertain science in an increasingly globalised world'.

There was a strong focus on the ways in which projections relating to an ageing population, immigration and fertility linked with the skills and workforce development agenda and the opportunities and the threats these present to lifelong learning and HE as a whole.

Speakers included Sir Muir Russell, Chair of the Universities UK Steering Group on Demographic Research and Mark Batho, Director of Lifelong Learning in the Scottish Government who argued for more flexible HE provision beyond the traditional full-time degree in the model of the University of the West of Scotland which has 50% part-time students and heavily modularised courses.

There was also a call for HE to ensure that students were aware of the skills they accumulating on top of subject-specific learning, and for greater employer engagement particularly with SMEs. The conference also heard from the UALL working group who are preparing UALL's position on the ELQ policy (withdrawal of funding for equivalent or lower qualifications) and the ways in which this funding change will affect lifelong learners, particularly women, disabled students and career changers.

