The development of programme specific progression agreements as an aid to vocational progression

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Introduction

Progression agreements (PAs) or accords were declared to be one of the central planks to be developed by Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) when they were first introduced by John Rushforth, then Head of Widening Participation (WP) at the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) at their Annual Conference in April 2005. In his presentation he confirmed that increasing opportunities for progression was a key indicator of success in widening participation. His question was 'What is the problem with progression?' In flagging up that over 90 per cent of students taking academic qualifications at level three already did progress compared with fewer than half of those with vocational qualifications, his response was that the academic route was a simple and well understood one, whereas vocational routes were often complex and unclear, or, worse, were non-existent. Progression agreements would define and simplify relationships across the level three to four boundaries by being explicit about options for students on level three programmes.

By 2007 there were 30 LLNs, and the LLN publication *Realising Potential – A vision for the future of higher level vocational learning* (LLNs, 2008) claimed that 1000 progression agreements had been signed and that many others were in the pipeline. This was reinforced by Whitston and Allen (2008) who noted that 'although the LLNs went about their task in quite different ways all were concerned with establishing agreements among partners to guarantee progression [progression agreements]'.

Whitston and Allen (2008) flagged up case study examples of four different approaches to progression, as implemented by MOVE (East of England LLN), Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance (GMSA), Sussex Learning Network and the Western Vocational LLN. Essentially the different approaches included publishing route maps and other forms of information and guidance at one end of the continuum, and at the other, specific and detailed programme level agreements which guaranteed places on a particular higher education (HE) programme. Some were concerned to rationalise and codify existing opportunities; others looked to use curriculum development to unblock routes where no clear progression existed. GMSA looked to take a vocational sector based approach, addressing problems with progression in Construction as a whole, whereas the Sussex approach focussed initially on the individual student.

Despite these differences in focus or approach, it is clear from the range of work that has now been done across these four and many other LLNs, and within institutions independently, that all progression agreements should reflect the following principles. They should:

- widen access to HE;

- enhance vocational progression opportunities between further education (FE) and HE and the workplace;

- provide students with a clearer view of progression pathways;

- develop and enhance collaborative relationships between HE and feeder institutions/ colleges; and

- increase understanding of alternate routes into HE across the combined catchments of the partnership.

The local context

The PA project that was scoped out as part of the LEAP AHEAD LLN was able to take much of this received wisdom on board, as LEAP AHEAD was one of the last LLNs to have funding confirmed. LEAP AHEAD - **L**earners, **E**mployers **a**nd **P**roviders **A**dvancing **H**igher **E**ducation **A**ccessibility and **D**elivery - represents fourteen organisations, including FE and HE institutions and Training Network providers in Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. The University of Derby (UoD) hosts the project. In its original Business Plan submission in July 2006, the development consortium made clear that progression would be a strong focus for the LLN:

> Specifically, the [LLN] will focus on increasing the number of vocationally qualified learners accessing HE by developing progression routes in the following priority occupational areas: Construction, Engineering, Tourism and Hospitality, Retail. (LEAP AHEAD, 2006: 3)

This element of the Business Plan confirmed further detail of the aims of, and the principles that would be used initially to construct, the model agreement:

> Progression Accords - Aims
>
> - To establish a model LLN progression accord based on common, clear principles that clearly sets out the roles and responsibilities of partners and the conditions needed to support learner progression.
>
> - To develop a set of LLN Progression Accords that enable learners to identify [clearly] opportunities for horizontal and vertical progression across the LLN for each occupational sector.

The LLN Accords will offer learners guaranteed progression opportunities within specific vocational pathways provided that required entry standards are achieved.

Accords will be developed at programme level and will involve all network members offering relevant programmes of study. This will enable learners to see a comprehensive map of the progression pathways available to them through the LLN.

Using Progression Accords, all programmes within the scope of the LLN will make a clear and unambiguous statement about the entitlement to progression that they offer.

Progression Accords will be sector, subject and, in some cases, route specific. Accords will deal with the specifics of learning outcomes; thus they will be negotiated and drafted by subject specialists within the LLN's sector groups. (LEAP AHEAD, 2006: 30)

All fourteen organisations in the LEAP AHEAD LLN subsequently agreed that 'accords' would be signed at institutional progression level in order 'to strengthen links and work collaboratively to encourage and facilitate the progression of vocational learners into and through higher education' (LEAP AHEAD, 2006: 27), whilst the programme-specific documents would be termed 'agreements'.

There was a target of 28 PAs across the LLN, with a focus on programmes within the Engineering, Construction, Hospitality, Tourism, Events and Retail sectors. Each institution was allotted a 0.4 full time equivalent PA Champion to support development. Although the PA Champions were varied in their overall roles and positions within organisations, most operated across all these sectors and were in an area of the host institution that had some WP remit.

The Derby approach

UoD's approach has been broad, with a view to working across all curriculum areas, and proactive and responsive to feeder institutions' requests. We have operated a process which gave an overview of the LLN project to programme leaders, facilitated meetings with feeder/receiver institutions to bring programme leaders together and discuss curriculum match, identified any gaps or bridging provision needed, estimated the potential of the PA, and identified appropriate progression activities within a specific timeframe. Admissions staff are copied into all PAs in order to ensure that they are aware that learners may be applying via this route and in order to facilitate future longitudinal data collection about the impact of PAs.

Both of the examples detailed in Table 1 involved building into the implementation section of the PA an initial opportunity for level three learners to visit university and attend subject specific taster/information sessions, giving opportunities to experience different campuses, workshop facilities/taster sessions and speak with HE tutors and learners. The feedback

Table 1: Details of the first two PAs to be signed

Feeder	Receiver
South East Derbyshire College (SEDC) • Level three Advanced Construction Award	UoD • FdSc (Foundation Degree) Built Environment (into one of three strands: Construction, Architecture or Civil Engineering)
SEDC • Level three Vehicle Maintenance	UoD • FdSc Motorsports Technology • FdSc Motorcycle Technology • University Certificate Technical Inspection for Motorsport

regarding the university visits and taster/information sessions was positive, with students more interested in exploring the particular subject area that interests them and expressing a preference for longer hands-on workshop sessions.

HE tutors from all programmes have been generous in their involvement with PAs and some have made initial visits to the feeder institutions to meet learners in their own comfort zone and have extended invitations for them to attend university visits/open days and field trips.

Regular communication and contact between feeder and receiver institutions is built into the PA to enable development of sustained relationships, with annual evaluation of the PA activities allowing for revision or repeat the following academic year.

Since the scheme was begun, UoD has generated seven completed and three draft PAs covering programmes in:

• Motorsports/Motorcycle Sports

• Hair and Salon Management

• Beauty and Spa Management

• Complementary Therapies

• Sports Massage/Exercise Therapy

• Countryside Management

• Built Environment/Construction/Architecture/Civil Engineering.

Each PA is divided into several sections, which ask a series of questions of the two parties:

1. Which programme/s will form the basis of the PA?

2. What type of learner is to be the intended beneficiary of PA development, e.g. vocational level three, work based learners, adult returners, etc.?

3. What will the PA do?

4. Why do we need it?

5. What is the agenda for development?

6. What are the resource implications?

7. What are the potential numbers of students?

8. Is the PA likely to involve enhancement/development of curriculum/bridging provision – and if so will it be accompanied by a bid to the LLN for curriculum development funding?

9. What are the specific details of the offer?

So, for example, the PA that focussed on Motorsport declared in response to question three that it would, amongst other things, 'clarify information, advice and guidance [IAG] given to students from FE/HE staff, raise awareness of higher level job opportunities in the motor vehicle/motorsports sector for students, and provide a timetable of activities for FE students to help promote and encourage awareness of progression opportunities into HE'. In response to question four, it was needed because 'FE learners are unaware of employment opportunities after gaining HE qualifications, HE application to FdSc Motorsport programmes from level three courses at xxxx College is less than ten per cent and no level three learners have applied in recent years to FdSc Motorcycle Technology'. A range of activities was identified in response to question five, including 'additional Maths classes offered regularly throughout the academic year at UoD, campus visits for motorsports taster events, and staff awareness raising'. The costs of activities such as visits, staff time and potential bridging in Maths if the embedding and additional work was not effective enough were identified. Ultimately the aim of this particular PA was to raise the level of application from 10 per cent to 25-30 per cent of the FE cohort.

At the core of each PA is the actual offer to students. For this PA, that offer was:

Learners who have achieved the Vocationally Relevant Qualification (VRQ) Vehicle Maintenance and Repair (level three) or the BTEC National Diploma Motor Vehicle Engineering and who meet the minimum entry requirements are guaranteed

an interview and place (subject to interview) onto one of the FdSc Motorsport/ Motorcycle pathways. A further progression opportunity for learners after successful completion of one of these motor technology Foundation Degree programmes is to 'top-up' to BSc (Hons) Motorsport Technology degree at the UoD.

The debate

Having looked at the specifics of what a PA looks like, and how our university has so far chosen to develop and implement them, in this section we ask some of the questions that might be relevant to the continued expansion of PAs. These questions reflect the discussion workshop that was held at the 2009 FACE Conference.

Why should we develop PAs at all?

It is still the case that progression follows traditional patterns, so that approximately 90 per cent of learners who have completed A levels progress to HE, whereas only 40-45 per cent of vocational level three learners progress. The current figure for apprentices is 6 per cent (HEFCE, 2009).

We know from a whole raft of reports and studies at local, regional and national level, e.g. HEFCE (2005); Kerrigan (2006a, 2006b), that reasons for this disparity are partly to do with the complexity of the vocational route compared to the simplicity of the link between A levels and HE, as Rushforth (2005) pointed out. However, it is also critically due to the perceptions about the relative value of academic and vocational education, and the levels of capability that are required in the workplace (University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC), 2005a). Where level three is considered to be the appropriate level of capability for employment, neither student nor employer has any interest automatically vested in progression beyond. This has been one of the barriers to the fulfilment of the higher level skills agenda promoted by Leitch (2006) and many others before him.

PAs can help to break down barriers and perceptions. Learners can be helped to recognise that studying at HE level is within reach, through tasters and other short HE experiences included as development activity. PAs also clarify the relationship between level three and level four learning, and so contribute to the erosion of the academic/vocational divide. This divide is still held by many academics to be a matter of fact rather than of debate, a view that is regularly reinforced by the retention of A level as the 'gold standard' route into HE and by other routes being often unhelpfully labelled as 'non-standard'. However, the divide is also reinforced by employers, many of whom identify HE as irrelevant to the workplace, and look to level three performance in a vocational qualification as their own measure of industry standard capability.

Linking programmes at level three with Foundation Degrees, which most of the UoD PAs set out to do, is a clear statement both of the validity of level three vocational programmes

as an entry route to HE and of the explicitly vocational nature of the Foundation Degree, and therefore of its relevance to the workplace.

To what extent do PAs contribute to the experience of the learner?

The use of PAs helps to focus IAG available for learners onto a specific route, or a series of clearly identified options. By this means the existing complexity of vocational maps and routes is simplified, and both IAG professionals and the learners they are supporting can hold a manageable set of expectations and a common understanding of the options available.

Where routes from level three to four are non-existent, the development of the PA is a means of opening conversations between institutions, which can therefore take a common and coordinated approach to developing regional curriculum progression. This particular function of the PA has been to some extent reflected in the LLN-supported development of regional resources in the Construction sector, in order to try to encourage and promote progression beyond what is often seen as the level three ceiling for trade capability, but is recognised by sector bodies, regional development agencies and many others as being too low for the industry to achieve competitiveness and therefore economic sustainability (East Midlands Development Agency (EMDA), 2008).

The collective development of the PA with structured conversations focusing on the curriculum inputs of the different partners is also a means of developing common staff approaches to curriculum delivery across the level three/level four transition. In turn this is likely to lead to a more comparable experience for learners and therefore to remove another of the barriers to transition, which is the perceived sudden and often real change in expectations put onto learners as they move from FE to HE.

To what extent can PAs benefit institutions?

The PA is a potentially useful business planning tool for institutions. It offers an aid to marketing programmes where progression is not currently very reliable. It provides not just a reason for contacting potential students, but also structured opportunities for engaging in a conversation about specific programmes. It is therefore useful where specific target programmes are not strong recruiters or where particular issues of equality of opportunity and fair access suggest that targeted recruitment should be applied.

PAs operate to a fixed and determined timeframe. In terms of supply of students into programmes they therefore facilitate planning, future proofing and potential growth. Whereas we are for this year in a period of no funded growth, we are also approaching the demographic changes from 2010 to 2020 which see a drop in the numbers of young people to fill future places. Increasing the percentage of students who do progress from level three remains one important strand in delivering government targets for increasing overall competitiveness in the workforce.

Where particular local or regional agendas are being identified by the employment markets, PAs can help institutions to respond with targeted activity aimed at supporting progression into high level development opportunities in line with demand.

A PA student will have an admissions 'flag' attached to him or her and so will be formally trackable. This means that data about trends in progression, who is coming from where to do what, will be easily available, and this will further facilitate both recruitment and curriculum planning.

Do PAs need to be part of a set of wider activities?

As demonstrated in the Learning and Skills Network (2008) research report, there are legions of initiatives designed to increase progression to and participation in HE. The framework PA can help to give a common purpose to related activities, and can identify the synergies that will help to maximise impact and minimise overlap. So within the UoD PAs, we have been careful where appropriate to link the planned activities with both Aimhigher Derbyshire and our own Schools Liaison team, and in other cases with other curriculum development initiatives operating through LEAP AHEAD.

We try to ensure a consistent approach to the provision of progression-related IAG through promoting information about the existence and focus of each PA within the IAG spheres of each participating institution, at institutional and faculty levels, and those regional agencies that are outside institutions (such as Aimhigher). As well as our internal system for tracking PA students, we are looking at whether we can have UCAS recognition for individual PAs, so that learners who apply via UCAS are recognised as having a PA.

How do PAs relate to other forms of WP activity?

An interesting potential confusion has recently arisen at UoD between the LEAP AHEAD funded PA project and what was previously called the UoD Compact Scheme, recently renamed the Progression Scheme. This scheme is concerned to offer progression for students coming from schools and colleges that are members of the scheme. The East Midlands region where the scheme is concentrated is characterised by being strongly representative of WP populations, so it does provide access for a very diverse student body and thus contribute significantly to our WP activity. Support and information is offered on a generic basis to all students from a particular partner, but without any particular programme-based routes for progression being identified. Although this is therefore a different progression offer, we are in the process of determining how differentiate the two more clearly.

Aimhigher Derbyshire has a particularly targeted audience for its provision of aspiration and achievement raising activities, but again they are not specific to programme-based progression opportunities. However, as Aimhigher approaches its final phase in 2011, areas of its activity could be defined within a PA. Some of this integration has begun by using

Aimhigher ambassadors and other resources to provide PA support activity such as learners' talks on fees and finance and tours of campuses. In a wider sense, because PAs require learners and staff to come into the university to see HE in action, and take students and staff from HE into pre-HE environments, they relate to and can complement other generic forms of WP within institutions such as open days, careers fairs and broader IAG events.

Should PAs be targeted at WP populations?

PAs could be targeted through selection of the range of programmes for which agreements are devised, with a focus on 'non-traditional' (i.e. non-A level) routes. In this way they would automatically have some focus on broader WP populations. Such targeted feeder provision may include, for example, 14-19 Diplomas, Access programmes, work-based learning routes, Apprenticeships, etc. The receiving HE provision could also be targeted to include Foundation Degrees, work-based learning programmes, continuing professional development (short programmes) and Higher National Diplomas, as well as selected vocational undergraduate degrees. They might also be used to indicate opportunities for direct entry into top-up awards or postgraduate level provision for those with significant work-based prior learning but lacking formal qualifications.

As one way of recouping some of the intensiveness of resource that is being acknowledged as required to support their introduction, PAs could also be used to encourage and secure increasing participation in full cost (non-funded) provision which is currently outside the cap on HEFCE funded growth.

Can PAs be used with employer engagement?

In 2006, HEFCE incorporated its view of progression agreements into its overall strategy for employer engagement (HEFCE, 2006). This strategy paper set out very clear expectations that Train to Gain, Strategic Development Funding for employer engagement, Lifelong Learning Networks, Foundation Degrees, and 14-19 Diplomas and Apprenticeships would all form a coherent set of initiatives to support higher level skills development through the engagement of HE and employers. The Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire Training Networks are trying to engage employers to work with training providers/FE colleges/HE institutions within a PA matrix. At the HE level, contracts engaging cohorts of employees could be underpinned by a PA. PAs could be attached to bite-sized chunks of learning and encourage credit accumulation as a means of incremental engagement with larger programmes and of supporting planned progression into higher levels as demonstrated in UVAC (2005b) and in the sorts of HE-industry partnership that the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) (2008) enthused about.

Should PAs guarantee access?

The UoD PAs have been specific to the institution/programmes involved. However generic PAs have been developed within and across the whole of the LEAP AHEAD LLN to

encompass progression for BTEC and 14-19 Diploma students. One of the implications of a generic PA is that greater numbers may be involved, and so this may mean fewer guarantees of places.

In the current position, where student numbers on HEFCE funded places are capped effectively for 2010 and possibly thereafter, offering guaranteed places may be difficult in some curriculum areas. However, the purpose of the PA is wider than guaranteeing a place, and so the guarantee of appropriate IAG, tasters, and support for applications and even interviews are all unproblematic. In some areas, where the demographic downturn may have an impact post 2011, places may still be guaranteed, but it would be unfortunate if the issue of guaranteeing places discouraged the broader use of PAs.

What limitations do PAs have?

Some PA development can become time/resource/funding intensive, and so economic constraints may limit activity to where there is payback for the investment that is required. It is time intensive to bring staff from different institutions together, but effective PAs are difficult to develop if the right contacts within institutions are not involved or if there is a history of challenging working relations between institutions or programme teams.

Conclusion

Parry et al. (2008) noted that 'the interfaces between further and higher education are configured in ways that do not necessarily secure smooth or seamless internal progression'. Ultimately, PAs can reduce barriers to progression caused by ignorance about opportunities on behalf of learners or those they look to for guidance and support. They can help to create new routes where routes are required. They can educate academics, employers and learners themselves about the validity of the relationship between education for capability within a vocational environment and academic programmes, and about the appropriateness of progression from one to another. What they may not be able to do is to increase progression where the market place will not support demand for higher level learning. That is an ongoing issue that we all address constantly.

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