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Published in:
Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning

DOI:
[10.5456/WPLL.21.1.94](https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.21.1.94)

Publication date:
2019

Document Version
Author accepted manuscript

[Link to publication in ResearchOnline](#)

Citation for published version (Harvard):
MacFarlane, K 2019, 'Widening participation through the Learner Life Cycle', *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 94-116. <https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.21.1.94>

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Widening Participation to Higher Education through the Learner Life Cycle

1. Introduction

There is a general consensus that the global movement towards a mass system of higher education (HE) means there is a greater diversity of experience among the HE student body (Trow, 2007). Inevitably then, there is also a greater diversity in the way in which students make transitions (Hussy & Smith, 2010). Despite this, there is a dearth of published examples illustrating whole-institution approaches to transition to encourage widening participation in HE. This paper aims to address this omission by way of an institutional case study which demonstrates a strategic whole-institution approach to widening participation through the learner life cycle.

The paper brings together a review of the transitions literature as it relates to widening participation, an analysis of the strategic approach to transition within the institution and evidence of the impact of widening participation drawn from both empirical and desk research. The paper advocates a life cycle model, described by Milburn (2012). Furthermore, the paper will demonstrate, via case studies examples of good practice, that widening participation and the student experience are positively impacted when a life cycle approach to managing transitions is employed.

The paper begins with an overview of the policy context in Scotland as this relates to transitions for widening participation and goes on to describe the institutional profile. A series of four exemplar case studies follows, each of which has been selected to illustrate

targeted transitional support for widening participation at a different stage of the learner life cycle. It should be noted that a comprehensive representation of the full range of transition activities for widening participation developed and employed by the institution is beyond the scope of this paper.

The following overarching research question is considered:

Research question: what is the impact on widening participation and the student experience when a life cycle model of transitions to higher education is employed?

2. Policy and institutional context

There has been concern about 'widening participation' and breaking down the exclusivity of university education, including ensuring progression and retention, in the UK and globally for the past 30 years (Osborne, 2003). Higher education in the U.K. has undergone major expansion over this period. What was once the preserve of an elite is now a mass system as concerns with social justice have driven the widening participation agenda. Despite achievement of higher levels of participation over this period, figures show that 18-year olds from Scotland's 20% *least* deprived communities are still more than four times as likely to enter university as those from the 20% *most* deprived communities (Commission on Widening Access, 2016). In Scotland, transition to higher education has therefore taken on a new prominence and is linked largely to the movement into university of the most disadvantaged students: measured through the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation

(SIMD). Unlike in England and Wales, Scottish students studying in Scottish institutions are not liable for tuition fees (Scottish Government, 2018).

Widening participation in HE is an important goal for the Scottish Government as evidenced by their establishment of the Commission on Widening Access (COWA) in 2015. COWA is charged with identifying models of good practice and advising on how these approaches can be scaled up and embedded across the sector. The case studies included in this paper demonstrate the extent of work being undertaken institutionally, to widen participation through improving transitions at each stage of the learner journey. Importantly both the literature and case studies validate the importance of partnerships between early learning providers, schools, colleges and universities as identified by Scottish Government as key to successfully widening participation.

Glasgow Caledonian University has a strong track record in attracting students from non-traditional backgrounds, particularly from backgrounds of social and economic disadvantage. For example, 97.2% of young first-degree entrants are from state school or college - more than 10% above the sector average. Twenty-three per cent of Scottish full-time first degree entrants at the University from all age groups come from the 20% most deprived backgrounds, 9 percentage points above the sector average of 14% (SFC, 2017). In addition, 47% of full-time undergraduates are first-generation students (GCU, 2017).

Recruitment data is matched by a strong track record in terms of student retention. In 2014-15, 91%, of full-time undergraduate entrants from MD20 were retained, just 2% below the average for all Scottish full-time undergraduates and ahead of the Scottish sector for MD20 and has shown an improvement of over 5 percentage points over a five year period.

Linked to its mission as the University for the Common Good, the commitment to widening participation at GCU is expressed in a strategic vision to have a global reputation for delivering social benefit and impact through education, research and social innovation. To achieve this, the university's first goal is to, 'Transform lives through education' (GCU, Strategy 2020). This is delivered via a holistic approach provided by a model of partnership working, engagement and support at multiple points throughout the learner journey. Student support commences prior to the decision to enter HE and includes aspiration raising, information provision about programmes/HE routes, pre-entry guidance and preparation for the university experience. It continues post-entry through the Common Good Curriculum which is supported, recognised and embedded within all programmes and the wider student experience. The Common Good Curriculum aims to prepare students to develop four 'Common Good Attributes' to equip them to make a positive difference to the communities they serve in addition to achieving the knowledge, skills and values of their professional and disciplinary area. This is underpinned by a Strategy for Learning which recognizes and embraces the diversity of GCU students, current and potential, and the University's commitment to the participation, progression and success of all students regardless of background (GCU, Strategy for Learning, 2015).

3. Higher education transitions and widening participation

Barriers to successful transition

Barriers to participation in HE for learners from under-represented groups include feelings of alienation, isolation and 'not fitting in' (Bowl, 2001). First-generation students experience transition differently from second-generation students who are already in possession of

certain attributes or ‘cultural capital’ prior to university entry (Leese, 2010). Thus, a great deal of the literature around widening participation and transitions examines the social and cultural capital that students have at their disposal (Reay, 2000; Devlin & MacKay, 2014; McMillan, 2013). Inequalities of social class affect the ways in which people construct, experience and negotiate different educational opportunities and routes (Read et al, 2003). Young, white, working-class men from disadvantaged areas are least likely of all to enter HE and the most likely to withdraw early. Transition to HE is therefore highly stratified and complex (Quinn, 2010).

In an international overview of adult access to HE, Osborne and his colleagues report the many factors underlying unequal access, including disability, socio-economic class, race, gender and location, ethnicity. They make the point that, although participation rates in HE across the world have improved, inequality ‘remains rife’ (Osborne et al, 2015:17). Thus, the barriers faced by learners from under-represented groups, many of whom have no previous experience of higher education, mean that transitions into and through HE take on a heightened significance for institutions and policy makers where transitions skills become essential and lie at the heart of lifelong learning (Lawrence, 2009).

Moving beyond the first year experience

In order to cope with the expanding nature of HE participation and the associated greater diversity of the student population, universities have, in general, resorted to processing the newly expanded numbers through the existing degree structure and timetables (Hussey & Smith, 2010). An example of this failure to embrace change can be seen in the transitions literature in terms of the focus on the first year experience and induction (Gale & Parker, 2012). Such examples have dominated both the literature and practice development for the past decade (Wayne et al, 2016:13). This focus on the first year experience is perhaps

unsurprising in the context of student withdrawal data internationally which demonstrates that students are most likely to withdraw from their courses during the first year of study (Barefoot, 2004). Whittaker (2008), however, challenges the notion that the focus for transitional support should be the first year of study. Instead she argues that transition support needs to be viewed as a longitudinal process which begins at pre-entry and continues through the first year and beyond. Osborne contends that it is not enough to focus on those ‘getting in’ to higher education and that unless ‘getting on’ and ‘getting beyond’ are considered any gains in access will not be consolidated (Osborne, 2003:18). This has led to researchers calling for a move in practice towards more holistic and sustainable institution-wide approaches to transitions for an increasingly diverse student body (Kift et al, 2010). A key message for the sector emerging from literature, therefore, is the importance of moving beyond pre-entry and the first year experience to embed transition activity within a learner life cycle model. HEIs should support the implementation of longitudinal transition activities that are mainstreamed and inclusive and therefore more likely to be meaningful and useful to all students (Wayne et al, 2016).

4. Methodology

The research methodology included a combination of desk research and empirical work. The first two case studies were developed by drawing on existing evidence from McKendrick and Brown (2017) and by the author of the current paper. The second two case studies were the result of empirical work. Data for the Learning Development Centre case study was derived from an internal report based on an enhancement led review and from interviews with staff and students. Data for the Common Good Curriculum case study was collected as part of a two-year evaluation study. The methodology involved desk research to provide an analysis of

institutional documents relating to the university mission, vision, values and supporting strategies and frameworks. In addition, staff and student interviews, student focus groups and two online student surveys were undertaken.

The approach taken in the development of the following case study examples is based on Milburn’s (2012) model for social mobility, which identifies four stages in the student lifecycle when there is a need for action. One case study is provided for each of the four stages of the student life cycle as defined by Milburn (Fig.1).

Fig. 1. Milburn’s Student Life cycle Model for Social Mobility (Milburn, 2012 p.3)

Life cycle stage	Defined as:
Getting ready	Interventions in schools, even as early as primary or pre-school, but generally in the later years of secondary school
Getting in	Support at point of application; admissions procedures; use of contextual data to identify students with the potential to succeed
Staying in	Measures to encourage retention, through academic, social or financial support
Getting on	Ways in which universities help students be equipped and ready to move into the labour market or further study when they graduate

Case study: Getting ready

Poor achievement in secondary school is more important in explaining lower HE participation rates among pupils for low socio-economic backgrounds than barriers arising at the point of entry to HE (Chowdry et al, 2013). Targeting widening participation activities at the pre-entry application point is, therefore, likely to have little effect. Instead, interventions

to raise attainment and hence raise the likelihood of participation in HE from learners from disadvantaged backgrounds need to come far earlier in the system (Vignoles & Murray, 2016). GCU's Caledonian Club is an example of such an intervention.

The Caledonian Club

Conceived as a longitudinal pre-entry model of widening participation, the Caledonian Club works with children and young people from 3–18 years and their families in areas of disadvantage in Glasgow. Supported by GCU's student mentors, all pupils who start their educational journey in one of the Caledonian Club local nursery schools have the opportunity to engage in a continuum of club activities at six key points in their educational journey, i.e. Nursery, Primary 2, Primary 5 and Primary 7, Secondary 1 and Secondary 2/3. There are an additional seven activities available either to targeted groups of pupils (e.g. P2 Literacy Project) or self-selecting groups (e.g. Families Learning Together Project). The Club engages more children, more often than any other university widening participation project in Scotland and since its foundation in 2008 has worked with 9,000 nursery, primary and secondary school pupils, almost 3,000 parents and over 250 GCU student mentors.

The focus of the initiative is to raise and confirm aspirations for HE at the pre-entry stage in order to increase progression to HE from partner schools. Thus, Caledonian Club members are provided with access to the University campus where a programme of key life skills is delivered including literacy skills. The objective of the Caledonian Club is to promote university as a recurring presence in the child's educational journey so that the Caledonian Club (and the university) becomes part of the pupil's lifeworld. Research McKendrick & Brown (2017) reveals that:

- 82% of Caledonian Club school leavers live in MD20 zones;
- 18% of parents/guardians of young pupils in Club schools left school without any Higher qualification; and
- Fewer than half of Caledonian Club Secondary 1 pupils were aware of anyone they knew who had gone to university.

A two-year research project which involved a rigorous comparison of Caledonian Club schools with control schools found that, at nursery and primary level, in Caledonian Club schools, pupils' awareness of HE was higher and there were noticeable improvements in aspirations, group working skills and self-confidence. In addition, parents' own aspirations to go to university themselves were higher. However, teacher expectations for children to go to university were often lower than expected, and significantly lower than the aspirations of parents for their children to go to university.

Research data collected pre- and post- Club interventions demonstrates that 92% of participants ended up with a better understanding of what a university is. In addition, there was a 7% increase in aspirations for university among participants overall and an 8% increase in the HE progression rate of Caledonian Club school pupils. In addition, there has been a 12% increase in the proportion of Caledonian Club school pupils progressing to positive destinations¹ (McKendrick & Brown, 2017).

The evidence demonstrates that the Caledonian Club successfully supports the raising of aspirations and enables positive learning experiences and opportunities amongst a

¹ Defined as per the Scottish Government's definition: higher education, further education, employment, training, voluntary work or activity agreements

disadvantaged population. Research is underway to ascertain the long-term impact of the Club's activities. There is no shortage of examples of university engagement with communities around initiatives to support social inclusion and cohesion with the aim of widening participation in higher education. However, few begin at the pre-school level and have a long-term focus. Even fewer programmes or initiatives have been at the heart of university strategy (Duke et al, 2013).

Case study: Getting ready and Getting in

Devlin and MacKay (2014) argue that non-traditional students have little or no understanding of how universities work. Thus, there is a need for institutions to, 'make the implicit explicit' to students, demystifying academic culture and simplifying language. The following case study demonstrates the impact of a unique widening participation model designed to immerse learners in the university environment whilst still at school thus fostering university readiness whilst at the same time raising attainment in partner schools.

The Advanced Higher Hub

In Scotland, the post-compulsory school system comprises the final two years of secondary school, S5 and S6 when pupils are aged 16-18 years. Pupils can go to university at the end of S5 as Highers provide the entry requirements for Scottish universities. While Highers remain the 'gold standard' for university entry, increasingly Advanced Highers, where studied, are becoming a condition of entry and, in some cases, can lead to direct entry to year two of a degree. Many schools in Scotland struggle to provide a range of Advanced Higher courses to

their final year pupils for a variety of reasons including small pupil numbers, timetabling constraints and lack of teacher expertise or resources. Pupils often then repeat Highers or take classes that are not directly related to their choice of post-school destination, in order to fill their timetable. Pupils in S6 from secondary schools in Glasgow which fall within the two lowest quintiles (MD20/MD40) of the SIMD are targeted for inclusion in the Advanced Higher Hub (the 'Hub'). The current average HE progression rate for pupils in these schools is 19%, whereas the Scottish sector average for state-funded secondary schools is 37% and for Glasgow City Council is 29% (Scottish Funding Council, 2013).

Established in 2013, the Hub provides an immersive year-long programme where school pupils study Advanced Highers within the university environment for up to 18 hours per week. They are registered students and have access to the full range of resources and facilities. What differentiates this programme is that the aim is to immerse learners in the HE environment prior to university entry so that pupils become familiar with the HE learning environment, which in turn will support their progression to and retention in HE. The objectives of the Hub thus include providing fair access to Advanced Highers; raising attainment in partner schools; supporting progression to HE and improving HE retention.

In academic years 2014-15, 2015-16 and 2016-17 Hub pupils outperformed the national average in terms of performance with a pass rate of 90%, 91% and 92% respectively which compares with a national pass rate for the same subjects combined of 78%, 81% and 79%.

As part of an evaluation study (MacFarlane, 2018a; 2018b), interviews were undertaken with 30 former Hub pupils attending a total of 8 HEIs UK-wide. Participants were engaged in a range of discipline areas and were in their first, second or third year of their chosen degrees.

Most participants came from the two lowest quintiles of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (MD 40: 87% MD 20: 67%) and the vast majority were first-generation students (70%). Participants reported having developed a range of academic skills through the study of Advanced Highers at the Hub ranging from research to critical analysis skills: academic writing skills with many identifying as independent learners (n. 21, 70%). Increased confidence was the most reported personal outcome (N=30, 100%) of studying Advanced Higher(s) within a university environment followed by increased independence (N=25, 83%) and motivation (N=13, 43%). Social skills were highlighted by all 30 (100%) participants fostered via interaction with new people working in groups or in pairs which helped to develop confidence orally presenting ideas and arguments in front of others. Of particular note for developing transitional support, all participants reported that without the Hub experience – many described the prospect of the transition to university without the Hub experience as being more of a ‘step’, ‘jump’ or ‘leap’.

In addition, all those participants who had studied science subjects (N=12) reported that the resources and facilities in the science laboratories enhanced their learning experience.

For the majority of participants (87%) the intellectual transition from school ‘pupil’ to university ‘student’ took place at the Hub. That is, prior to entry to HE and whilst they were still at school but attending the Hub. This is reflected in their responses:

‘You are treated like as student so you feel like a student.’(Former Hub pupil)

‘The confidence I gained has helped me to feel that I’m good enough to attend university and that I belong there.’(Former Hub pupil)

‘Students are smart, right? You won’t feel like a student if you don’t feel smart and you’re not going to feel smart unless it’s ok to be smart. The Hub gives you that environment.’ (Former Hub pupil)

The transformational impact of the Hub resonates with the research literature. In terms of belonging, interactions with tutors are critical. Students feel most confident in an inclusive pedagogical environment in which trust is established and belonging is fostered (Burke et al 2016). Moreover, transition support should have as its focus developing the capacity to cultivate supportive peer relations; meaningful interaction with staff; knowledge; skills; confidence and identity as a successful HE learner. When this happens the result is an HE experience which is relevant to interests and future goals (Thomas, 2012). When immersed in new fields, HE students can develop strategies and nuanced understandings of their previous experiences, social background and different learning cultures and contexts to inform the development of their learner identity (James et al, 2015).

Case study: Staying in

While many HE institutions acknowledge the importance of increasing student retention, most simply adopt an ‘add a course’ strategy to address this area which means that these interventions are marginal to the mainstream of the institution (Tinto, 1999). For Tinto, retention needs to be taken more seriously and academic advising is pivotal to this approach. Academic advisors provide students with connections to various support services on campus in addition to a personal connection to the institution thus fostering a sense of belonging. Consequently, academic advising should be viewed as the, ‘hub of the wheel’ and not just one of the various isolated support services provided for students (Habley, 1994). The following case study provides an example of such an approach in which student support is

mainstreamed, contextualised within the discipline area, locally accessed and developed in consultation with course leaders.

Learning Development Centres (LDCs)

Following a review of academic and student support, functions formerly located in a central support service were devolved to the academic faculties. While the prime responsibility for academic support still lies with the teaching staff, complementary academic and ICT support is now provided by a faculty based Learning Development Centre. Academic Development Tutors based in these centres work in partnership with course leaders and module teams to provide effective academic and developmental support for all students to enhance their experience of learning to enable success. There is a particular emphasis on ensuring that the individual needs of students are met and on supporting the needs of students from areas of deprivation. All students are encouraged to use the support available within their LDC.

In addition to providing tailored, embedded sessions delivered as part of a course/module, one-to-one and on-line support is offered as well as small group sessions and workshops. Discipline related support includes: academic writing; presentations; exam preparation; independent learning guidance; learning technology tuition; understanding and responding to feedback, English for academic purposes, managing exam stress and confidence building. Support is available pre-entry for students articulating from college by way of summer schools in mathematics, for example.

Pre- and on programme contextualised and embedded learning support for retention, progression and completion within the discipline area and is locally accessed. This ensures that Academic Development Tutors are familiar with the culture and language of the subject area. The approach offers built-in support for all students and as such is a developmental

rather than remedial model. Examples of support provided by the LDCs include designing, delivering and embedding transition programmes for all students articulating from college. These programmes are tailored to the programme of study and are focussed on study skills in the context of specific assessment tools on the programme. In addition, a tailored online community and specialist ‘return to study’ workshop programme and provision for ‘child-friendly tutorials’ is promoted. Research has highlighted that MD20 students attend in greater numbers than all other students. The LDCs also provide targeted support. For example, student data from within the academic School is analysed by the Centre in order to identify those students who have failed or are at risk of failure. All students who fail modules or are required to re-sit exams/coursework are contacted to make an appointment with an Academic Development Tutor in order to address deficiencies in their study regime, to help them develop a personal planned approach and to encourage them to reflect upon and audit their learning strategy.

While it is acknowledged that direct correlations are difficult to achieve, since the inception of the LDCs, the university’s progression and retention figures have steadily increased and the gap in retention between students from MD20/40 backgrounds and the wider undergraduate population has narrowed considerably. In addition, LDCs are consistently mentioned as a positive form of academic support through the National Student Survey and internal module and programme evaluation. Institutional data reveals:

- Improved retention for all undergraduate entrants: retention increased by 2.8% from 88.7% in 2009-10 to 91.5% in 2014-15 which is higher than the sector average of 91.3%;

- Improved retention for MD20/40 students: retention increased by 2.7% from 87.5% in 2009-10 to 91.2% in 2014-15 and is above the sector average of 88.1%;
- The gap between the progression of MD20/40 students and the rest of the student population narrowed to just 0.3% (from 1.2%) over the period since the introduction of the LDCs;
- National Student Survey data for the same period reveal steady improvement in scores for Personal Development (85%) which is higher than the Scotland and UK averages of 83% and 82% respectively;
- An institutional review of the centres concluded that they had a proved successful in terms of a 'Proactive, discipline- focussed model of academic support and development.' This was evidenced through increasing usage of the centres and the contribution of the centres to an improvement in the progression and retention rates for all students including those from the most deprived quintiles.

Proactive and timely access to learning and life support has been emphasised as a key principle for a transition pedagogy (Kift, 2009). In addition, interventions and approaches to improve student retention and success should, as far as possible, be embedded into mainstream provision to ensure all students participate and benefit from them. This will improve the retention of some students and contribute to maximising the success of all students (Thomas, 2012). The Learning Development Centre model provides an example of such an intervention.

Case study: Moving beyond

The literature reveals that the main focus of transition research has been (up to comparatively recently), transition into and to a lesser degree through university (Wayne et al, 2016). This is borne out in a recent report from the Higher Education Academy and the National Union of Students Scotland, which outlines the difficulties students face in articulating the skills they have developed in HE, and for employers in terms of recruiting the work ready college and university leavers. The report recommends that institutions consider a new approach to embedding employability and ‘graduate attributes’ alongside traditional curricula and supporting students to be aware of skills as they are being developed (HEA/NUSS, 2013). The following case study provides an example of embedding graduate attributes in the curriculum where ‘curriculum’ refers to the totality of the student learning experience, both formally within the taught curriculum and informally through co- and extra-curricular activities. What differentiates the approach below is that the attributes in question are underpinned within the university’s strategy for learning, core values and mission, ‘For the Common Good’.

Common Good Curriculum

The goal of the Common Good Curriculum is to ensure that students develop the attributes needed to make a positive difference to the communities they serve, in addition to acquiring the knowledge, skills and values associated with their particular professional or disciplinary areas. The Common Good Curriculum supports the development of four ‘Common Good attributes’: active and global citizenship, an entrepreneurial mind-set, responsible leadership and confidence. These attributes are underpinned by the university’s core values of Integrity, Creativity, Responsibility and Confidence.

Curriculum development is linked to the quality assurance process as part of programme development, approval and review processes. Curriculum content is mapped to highlight the ways in which Common Good attributes are embedded within each academic programme.

An example at the co-curricular level is the Enactus Student Network (an external network the university engages with) which provides a platform and methodology to bring together students from across the university to work in teams to work with communities and individuals to create community development projects. Students are encouraged to identify a need in the community, carry out a needs assessment, then design and implement entrepreneurial community projects.

To complement the embedding of Common Good Attributes within the taught curriculum, the Common Good Award aims to encourage and support students to develop Common Good Attributes by engaging in co- and extra-curricular activities alongside their studies. While many universities have skills or employability awards, what differentiates the Common Good Award is its dual focus on students' personal development, in terms of employability and social innovation skills, and on the impact their engagement has had on the community they have served.

Qualitative research exploring the impact of students' engagement in Common Good activities is ongoing. An explicit focus of this evaluation work this year is the Common Good Award pilot. Evidence from student focus groups confirms that students pursue the award in order to have formal recognition for the change-making activities they are undertaking at a co and extra-curricular level. They report that they appreciate having formal recognition for Common Good activity that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. Students recognize the development of Common Good Attributes within their change-making activities has

improved their employability prospects and value having these skills validated moving forward into employment and/or further study. Consultation with employers to date indicates that the Common Good Attributes are aligned to the capabilities, and the underpinning values, they are seeking in graduates. Over half of undergraduate students surveyed in 2017 agreed that they had had the opportunity to get involved in community engagement and/or volunteering activities.

Evidence from focus groups with undergraduate students provides confirmation of the value students attach to the opportunities they have to obtain recognition for the attributes developed through co- and extra- curricular activities:

‘I helped S5 and S6 pupils in a school in a deprived area with CVs, university and college applications and I ran industry and college visits with them. It definitely improved my confidence and leadership and I felt like an active citizen by being involved in the community.’(Student)

‘I undertook mentoring both to give something back to other students but also to gain valuable skills. I applied for the award so that I could have external validation for the attributes and competences I have developed through mentoring which have enhanced my employability.’ (Student mentor)

The importance of both curricular and co-curricular approaches has been identified as the ‘missing link’ in terms of programme coherence (Kift, 2009: 1). A broad view of the ‘curriculum’ thus conceived has the potential to be both an academic and a social ‘organising device’ that brings knowledge and the student experience together (McInnis, 2001: 11). Kuh et al (2005) found that universities that value diversity, high-quality teaching and support for all students tend to promote social responsibility by encouraging students to give back to their communities. In addition, they recommend that, ‘policies, programmes and practices must be

aligned with student academic preparation... as well as with the institution's mission, values and culture' (ibid: 297). The Common Good Curriculum is such a development.

The co-ordinated cross-institutional life cycle model of transitions to and through HE described in the case studies demonstrates the lifelong impact of a university education when these four stages are targeted and joined-up in a strategic institutional model. This can be illustrated in the case of a former Caledonian Club and Hub pupil who progressed to GCU who speaks of the benefits of the support he received from both initiatives as well as from the LDC and through his Common Good Curriculum:

'The support of the Club and the Hub greatly aided my acclimatisation to University life for which I shall always be grateful. I acknowledge the support that I have received throughout my programme and I am always looking for the opportunity to help someone in return. It's about working for the Common Good.'

5. Discussion

Current policy positions the concept of transition as highly significant in issues of social inclusion and that enabling learners to manage transitions more effectively is both possible and a worthwhile objective for achieving greater social justice. While there are examples of HEIs contributing to greater social inclusion, overall such attempts have been, 'fragmented, lacking overall strategic vision, and dependent on the particular efforts of individuals and of units within universities' (Duke et al, 2013:64).

At the same time, some authors call into question the notion of 'managing transition' since, for them, this approach is based on a deficit model which problematizes the learner and places failure on behalf of a person or group as opposed to an institutional or systemic failure. In some universities this leads to a focus on 'widening participation students', where a lack of

information and learners' attitudes are seen as the barriers to participation presumed to 'afflict working-class young people' (James & Beedell, 2009: 11). Instead, the movement from one educational setting to another is not just a 'transition to be managed'; it is itself a site for social inequality.

Notwithstanding this important caveat, Kift (2009) argues that widening participation and student success cannot be left to chance, particularly those aspects that HEIs have the power to control. Moreover, in an analysis of the literature on the student experience, Yorke and Longden (2008:4) conclude that, 'There are 'several broad areas of institutional activity through which the chances of student success can be enhanced.' The first two areas they identified were an institutional commitment to student learning and hence to student engagement, and proactive management of student transition. The implication is that transitions can and should be managed but that institutions should adopt a 'strength' or 'abundance' model which focuses on what the person already knows and can do and builds from there. The examples provided in the case studies described earlier provide such a positive conception of diversity. The very early schools work of the Caledonian Club, for example, demonstrates the transformative impact of raising lifelong learning aspirations.

It should be noted that there are inevitably limitations with the data available on impact presented here. While there is evidence to demonstrate that Caledonian Club members progress to positive destinations, it would be useful to know of their subsequent progress through and retention in HE. Likewise, there is anecdotal evidence of former Hub participants progressing well through HE. However no systematic data is available about the subsequent progression and retention of Hub pupils once at university or college. Such data could be gathered via a tracking approach which follows learners' progress from early learning, throughout education and onwards into employment. The need for improved systems of tracking 'widening access' students is, however, widely acknowledged (Riddell at

al, 2013; Sosu et al, 2016). One of the inherent data gathering difficulties lies in the absence of a unique identifier which follows individuals from pre-school to post-school destinations. Were this difficulty overcome, the outcomes of such a longitudinal tracking study would strengthen the evidence base. This is in line with COWA's recommendation to prioritise the development of a more substantial evidence base across the Scottish sector (COWA, 2017).

6. Conclusions

Attempts to manage transitions into, through and out of Higher Education have traditionally focused on induction and the first year experience as the principal means of supporting learners. Whilst acknowledging that these two time-bound phases are key periods for learners, especially those from under-represented groups, the evidence of impact illustrated in the case studies outlined above, points clearly to a broader view of 'transition' for widening participation and enhancing the student experience.

Working from the premise that transitions can and should be managed for social inclusion, adopting a whole-institution life cycle model based on a 'strength' perspective of the learner can be seen to yield transformational impact for widening participation and the student experience. We have seen that extending transitions support to well before the point of entry can produce benefits for learners across the life cycle. Aspirations can be nourished and skills and confidence developed while perceived barriers to entry can be addressed and confronted in school children from areas of deprivation. Raising attainment in schools with low HE progression rates via an immersive, long-term experience of university level study on campus whilst still at school facilitates a positive transitional experience. In this context, learners from deprived communities, many of whom are first-generation students, develop the

necessary skills, become independent learners and foster the personal and social capabilities to progress to Higher Education. Moreover, the opportunity to study HE level courses as associate students within a university environment nurtures a learner identity as an HE student prior to entry. Progression and retention can be enhanced when student support and academic advising is given a 'Hub of the wheel' status in which support is mainstreamed and contextualised within the discipline area, locally accessed and developed in consultation with course leaders. This has the potential to narrow the non-completion gap between students from the most deprived areas and the remainder of the undergraduate student population. Harnessing the taught and the co- and extra-curricular spheres to reflect the institutional commitment to social justice, provides an opportunity to develop graduates who are not only proficient in their professional or disciplinary areas but who are ready to move beyond their university experience with the attributes required to make a positive difference to the communities they serve. To sum up, a strategic approach to transitions through the student life cycle that reflects a coherent, integrated, coordinated policy and practice impacts positively on widening participation and the student experience more generally.

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