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How to cite:

Cannell, Pete and Thomson, Joan (2012). Higher education policy in Scotland and the implications for part-time study. In: SRHE Annual Research Conference 2012: What is Higher Education for? Shared and contested ambitions, 12-14 Dec 2012, Celtic Manor, Newport, South Wales, UK.

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Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://www.srhe.ac.uk/conference2012/abstracts/0146.pdf>

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Higher education policy in Scotland and the implications for part-time study

In 2010-11, HE student numbers in Scotland were at a historic high of 290,000. The number of students at higher education institutions (HEIs) accounted for 82 per cent of all students enrolled, with the remaining 18 per cent studying at HE level in colleges (SFC, 2012). Although the proportion of students studying at colleges is falling it remains the case that, in contrast to the university sector, the population of HE students in the colleges is skewed towards the 20 per cent most deprived quintile of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). Improving the opportunities for these students to move on to degree study is therefore an important component of the SFC widening participation policy. However, this is only one part of a major reform agenda for post-16 education in Scotland, outlined in the pre-legislative paper *Putting Learners at the Centre* (Scottish Government, 2011), that aims to simplify the learner journey and widen access to universities. In addition, the reform is proposed at a time of financial constraint therefore, the Scottish Government is exploring ways to make the learner journey more effective for learners and more efficient for the public purse. Key to the learner journey is the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) introduced in 2003 which includes school, college and university qualifications and is seen as an enabling framework that in principle opens up the possibility of effective transition between the sectors.

There are increasingly a number of different routes that students can follow to achieve an undergraduate degree, some of which offer the potential to achieve a degree in a shorter timescale and / or at a lower cost. One such route is entry to university from college following attainment of a Higher National Certificate (HNC) or Higher National Diploma (HND), where learners enter year 2 or 3 of the traditional four year full-time honours undergraduate degree. Known as articulation, the SFC has had a policy on articulation since 2004 and was introduced to widen access and ensure entry to HE for non-traditional learners. Since 2008, the SFC have developed this articulation work by funding five of the most effective 'post-92 universities' to create regional articulation hubs working closely with other local universities and colleges. The Open University (OU) in Scotland is also funded to develop this work where the focus is on part-time routes nationally. Other routes include, achievement of an honours degree in less than the standard four years through accelerated study, or part-time study over a number of years often combined with employment.

Much of the activity undertaken around college to university articulation has been based around students moving from a full-time HNC/D directly to year 2 or year 3 of a relevant degree qualification with full credit and no loss of time (Knox et al., 2007). Using the results of a range of studies (Cannell et al., 2010), the OU in Scotland has been able to track students' learning journey from college to the OU and our findings show that for part-time students the transition experience of previous college students is influenced by a range of factors including their personal circumstances, time away from study whilst working and career changes. As a result, their study choices are non-linear in respect of their subject choice, their level of study and whether they make use of credit transfer or not.

In addition to the complexity inherent in these learner journeys, we need to read these journeys in relation to changes in the demand for full-time places at university. There are a higher number of applications from students with 'traditional' entry qualifications, meaning that Scottish institutions that might have in the past been seen as recruiting universities are now able to select (SFC, 2011). This presents challenges for universities engaged in articulation activity to ensure that they offer a system of guaranteed places for college students articulating with a HN qualification.

In addition, institutions are being asked to maintain student numbers whilst sustaining a real-term reduction in funding. In turn, this means that many may favour recruiting full-time students at the expense of part-time.

The general direction of travel for the Scottish Government's reform agenda is to take a different approach to structures and funding where planning, funding and delivery is focused on a regional approach, responding to the economic needs of that region. This is having the greatest effect on the college sector, where colleges in thirteen identified regions are required to collaborate on and agree a set of regional outcomes that they will in turn be funded upon. Outcome based funding is also being introduced for HEIs, where outcome agreements that set targets for access and retention, articulation, equality and diversity, knowledge exchange and work-based learning are inextricably linked with the funding the institution receives. Alongside this the Scottish government have initiated a review of governance of both HE and college sectors (Scottish Government, 2012).

The Scottish Government have a stated aim of increased flexibility for learners, including more part-time provision (Scottish Government, 2010). Questions arise in respect of part-time students – will adequate opportunities be made available for them? Currently, Scottish Government has a policy of free HE for Scottish domicile students but it remains the case that part-time students pay their own fees or make use of a range of financial support measures available. Will further incentives be put in place to encourage more part-time learning? While progress has been made in increasing the number of students that articulate from college HNC/D study, more can be done. The OU in Scotland evidence suggests that part-time learners value the flexibility of part-time study that allows them to repeat study at the same level or start at a lower level or change subject from previous study. Will this flexibility be maintained for part-time learners in a climate of efficiency savings in HE provision? With increased emphasis on regional planning and increased articulation between college and university, will students still have the flexibility to move between regions and institutions to meet their learning needs?

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