Advance: challenging the structure of higher education to meet the needs of adult work-based learners

Liz Marr[a1], Cath Walsh[b] and Mike Lomas[c]

[a]*Open University, UK,* [b]*Manchester Solutions, UK and* [c]*University of Bolton*

Abstract

In late 2009, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills report, Higher Ambitions, laid out challenges to the UK higher education sector to deliver flexible learning opportunities. These objectives are mirrored in Scotland through New Horizons and in Wales through For Our Future and build on a range of policy and research agendas relating to economic growth, perceived skills gaps and widening participation. Responses have been mixed, with some institutions embracing civic engagement opportunities. The real challenge for the higher education sector, however, lies in the extent to which existing systems, processes and infrastructures, predicated on a minority participation model of provision, are fit for this new purpose.

This paper draws on evidence from a Lifelong Learning Network Credit Accumulation and Transfer scheme, Advance. The scheme facilitates work based and lifelong learning by providing easier access to modules carrying credit towards a range of higher education qualifications within the FHEQ. Learning programmes are based on an 'emergence' model where the learner or employer is able to continually build and re-shape the learning journey to respond to their personal or specific business needs.

Evaluation of the pilot study suggests that to provide such flexibility, universities need to re-think awards and programmes, challenge notions of academic coherence and provide innovative interpretation of the QAA codes of practice for partnership working.

Keywords: lifelong learning, credit accumulation and transfer, employers, work-based learning.

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[1] Corresponding author. E-mail address: e.a.marr@open.ac.uk

Introduction

Within the last ten years, in the UK specifically, but more generally across the developed and developing worlds, there has been a steady and relentless shift in the drivers shaping the higher education (HE) sector. These are, in the main, due to a more finely nuanced perception of the nature and purpose of higher education premised on the right of whoever is paying the piper to call the tune. Where there is a heavy dependence on state funding to deliver public goods (Bell*,* Stevenson and Neary, 2009) this is perhaps understandable, but even the fast growing private providers are focused on the need to deliver the private goods for which their customers pay; an enhanced career and thereby earning potential.

A review of the roots of higher education suggests that this is, in fact, no great change. The medieval institution prepared young men for a professional career, usually in the church, and as Graham (2008) explains, it provided:

> "general, liberal education … as a foundation for citizenship and for
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> training in the professions of law, medicine and divinity" (Graham,
>
> 2008:158).

It had a scholarly or inquiry-based focus and disseminated knowledge through its publications and teaching. Later, the Napoleonic institutions of Northern Europe, similar to the polytechnic in model, he describes as an instrument of the state which emphasises

> "useful subjects and social need" (Graham, 2008:159).

Newman's idea of the university and the Humboldtian ideals emanating from Germany add to our conceptions of what a university is for (Anderson, 2009). But the modern university (Watson, 2007) is often a hybrid of all these models and the sector itself comprises a range of provision from specialist teaching academies to intensive research institutions.

It could be argued that recent government policy and strategy relating to higher education has been increasingly interventionist across the four nations of the UK. Funding

streams have been manipulated in order to deliver to an agenda which focuses heavily on the production of a skilled workforce to ensure continued economic competitiveness. At the same time, attempts to widen participation are now so entwined with ideas of lifelong learning that the terrain is becoming more complex than perhaps even Barnett (2000) anticipated. Moreover, the general election in May 2010 has brought considerable further uncertainty for the sector. What is inescapable, however, is the drive, in line with Leitch (2006), to get employers and students to pay their share of the higher education (HE) bill and to persuade higher education institutions (HEIs) to become more flexible in their provision.

There are a number of problems for the sector in meeting these objectives. These are, in the main, structural – processes and procedures designed for delivery to young full time undergraduates in an elite or minority participative context have become reified and difficult to challenge. But there are also cultural barriers which include, ironically, a resistance to vocational progression in those universities founded specifically to prepare students for professions. Difficulties in engaging with employers is also cited as a barrier in the sector (Boud and Solomon, 2003, Lambert, 2003) although there is a tendency for each side to lay the responsibility with the other for, to paraphrase Snow (1965), the gulf of understanding between them. At a fundamental level, some members of the sector also query whether universities should respond unquestioningly to government agenda and argue that the nature and purpose of HE is undermined by undue interference in institutional autonomy and academic freedom.

As a way of encouraging responsiveness, governments have, through funding councils, channelled money to pump-prime initiatives to foster more productive relationships between employers and universities. This paper reports on one such initiative, Lifelong Learning Networks (LLN) and, in particular a scheme developed by a strategic further and higher education transfer alliance (referred to hereinafter as the United Alliance) based in the North of England. Advance is a Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT) scheme designed to deliver flexible bite-sized learning opportunities across multiple higher education providers. The project was piloted in a large urban conglomeration with seven providers, thirteen employers and fifty learners and concurrent formative evaluations were undertaken with all participants. Here we discuss the results of the pilot and its implications for a range of stakeholders, including national governments and funding bodies.

We begin with a more detailed discussion of policy developments and the role and purpose of the LLNs in meeting widening participation (WP) and lifelong learning ambitions. We then consider some of the challenges in delivering on policy, with specific reference to the various stakeholders. The project itself is then described, with emphasis on the evaluation and the methodology adopted to undertake the various strands. Finally, we discuss our findings and make recommendations for further work in this area.

Lifelong learning, widening participation and the new higher education environment

There have been a number of reviews of English higher education in recent years but the broadest and most influential by far was that conducted by Dearing in 1997. Whilst the more recent Browne review (2010) has critical implications for fees and funding, Dearing covered every aspect of higher education from who should pay to how teaching quality should be assured. As with the Kennedy review of Further Education (1997) which pre-ceded Dearing by a matter of months the report made reference to the importance of equity in access to education and advocated expansion of the sector. However, Dearing's reference was explicitly for expansion at sub-degree level and thus we saw, in 2000 the introduction of a new higher education qualification – the Foundation degree (Fd) (Beaney, 2006). These were intended to be part time and work -based programmes of HE level study, in partnership with employers and delivered in further education (FE) rather than HE. However, there are a significant number of Fds validated as full time routes and anecdotal evidence suggests they may be perceived by applicants lacking the entry requirements for an honours degree as an alternative means of access. As Harvey (2009) points out, only 56% of Foundation degrees are taken part-time and only 20% delivered in the workplace.

With the introduction of the new diplomas (14-19) it seemed that there were clear vocational pathways emerging in England, at least. But the row over what some saw as an attempt to force Tomlinson's (1996) recommendations (to create parity of esteem between academic and vocational qualifications by introducing a single spine) through the back door has resulted in what could be described as a "dog's breakfast". The new qualifications are seen by critics as neither "fish nor fowl" and despite arguments that they are designed to prepare learners for university as well as for work, they do seem to be regarded as yet another

alternative to A level, with many experienced teachers arguing that BTEC qualifications do a much better job. Indeed, the new coalition government announced within months of election that the forthcoming diplomas in humanities and modern languages would not go ahead and all developmental funding for existing strands would cease.

The second, more frequently referenced, policy driver is the Leitch review of 2006 commissioned by the Government, which set a target for an increase in the 19-65 population educated to Qualifications and Curriculum Framework (QCF) level 4 (higher education certificate) from 29 per cent to 40 per cent by 2020. To achieve this, Leitch advocated shared responsibility between employers, individuals and government and a focus on adult learning. This was because, in 2006, 70% of the 2020 working age population had already left compulsory education. If the level 4 targets were to be met, increased investment was required in higher education and engagement between employers and universities had to be improved. HEFCE had already introduced the concept of co-funded workplace degrees and Leitch also stressed engagement at QCF level 5 and above (ie to higher education diploma) . As a result of this review the English funding council began to fund what they called 'shared investment' or employer co-funded student places. However, what the government did not address was better funding for part time learners (Callender and Heller,2009). As we write, the Browne Review (*op cit*) seems set to redress that balance, although the full implications of the recommendations have not yet been fully assessed.

Delivering on policy – challenges and opportunities

There have been many other changes in the sector since the removal of the binary divide gave polytechnics the right to apply for university status and title. Critical to developments has been changing funding regimes which have steadily encouraged the marketisation of higher education. The search for alternative income sources has led to a focus on the recruitment of international students, for example and the turn to enterprise. The provision of Continual Professional Development or CPD courses has also been a growth area as some occupations, such as health and child care, have become professionalised At the same time, government interventions in the sector, via the funding councils, have channelled resources into initiatives designed to create demand among employers and to encourage greater enterprise within

universities. These kinds of activity are referred to as 'third stream' or 'third leg' and are intended to encourage civic and community engagement.

Two main funding sources for third stream were introduced in England at the start of the 21st century. Higher Education Resources for Business and Community (HEFCE, 2000) and the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEFCE, 2001) were established to assist universities in making 'significant and measurable contribution to economic development and the strength of communities'. The scope of expected activity is summarised by Watson (*op cit*, 2007), drawing on Thirunamachandran (2006), as comprising private sector competitiveness and growth, public sector efficiency and cohesion, cultural enrichments and enhanced quality of life for communities and provision of resources and opportunities for the social and civic arenas. Measurement of this kind of work is, however, notoriously difficult. Wedgewood (2006) has produced a third stream taxonomy which links economic strength to social strength and allows universities to map their activity against wealth creation and quality of life indicators. The former includes incubation and start-ups, support for business competitiveness and improvements in skills and enterprise.

However, attempts by universities to engage with employers – a major component of third leg activity – were, and still are, fraught with difficulty. Although businesses spend over £600 per head per year (O'Leonard, 2010) on training and development for their staff, higher education institutions have not been the provider of choice. HEFCE's workforce development programme (http://www.hefce.ac.uk/econsoc/employer/fe/) brings together a number of projects – regional pathfinders, the Training Gateway etc – to help businesses locate sources of support for their training and development needs within the HE sector. Alongside these developments, there was also concern at the lack of progression opportunities for vocational learners into higher level study and funding was therefore made available, from 2004, for Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs). According to the funding council, the objective of the LLNs was "to improve the coherence, clarity and certainty of progression opportunities for vocational learners into and through higher education". (HEFCE, 2010)

At first sight, it would appear that the function of the LLNs was to concentrate on the supply side in terms of identifying progression routes, providing information, advice and guidance and developing new HE curriculum in the form of foundation degrees, work-based

learning, e-learning and collaborative modules. However, the increasing importance of employer input to the design and choice of curriculum in ensuring that it meets relevant skills needs has more recently been recognised. For example, Sector Skills Councils, as the voices of employers, are becoming more integrated in planning processes for new provision and co-funded Additional Student Numbers, to be part-funded by employers, are offered to providers in attempts to encourage greater engagement.

Such engagement is not without challenge, as we have already intimated. In times of recession, especially, businesses need to be certain that they are getting value for money, that the provision meets their needs, can be delivered quickly and flexibly and that they will see early impact. However, HEIs are seen as notoriously slow and cumbersome, constrained by rigid infrastructures and quality assurance processes. Furthermore, many in the sector are averse to what they see as attempts to challenge academic freedom and institutional autonomy in forcing institutions to meet government agenda. As Watson (2007) expresses it:

> "Traditionally the battle lines have been drawn between an economically focused preoccupation with human capital, seeing qualified manpower as an essential element of growth, and a community-focused desire for enhanced social capital seeing education at all levels as a way of solidifying cohesive norms of mutually satisfying behaviour". (Watson, 2007:14)

Lifelong Learning Networks thus faced some potentially significant barriers to meeting their objectives. In addition to the disjunctures between employer demands and HE provision, they also brought together competing organisations to work in partnership. In a review conducted for the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) by the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI) in 2008, Little and Williams (2008) highlight some of the difficulties LLNs faced as "establishing relationships between a range of providers (with their own histories, and missions, which themselves may be shifting) and with other stakeholders" and "establishing shared understandings of the nature and activities of LLNs". (Little and Williams, 2008:6). They go on to suggest that "Progress towards reaching such shared understandings has been hampered by shifting government priorities, uncertainties at policy

level, and perceptions of initiative overload, overlap and duplication" (Little and Williams, 2008:6).

A number of recommendations emerged from the interim review, among them that:

> "given that the employer engagement arena is an increasingly crowded one, LLNs should play to their strengths by bringing together academics and employers, developing niche markets (i.e. in curriculum development and progression opportunities) and being aware of (and exploring opportunities to link with) other initiatives".
> (Little and Williams, 2008:8)

The project that this paper addresses is one such attempt.

Advance: The pilot

The United Alliance is a partnership of universities, further education colleges, work-based learning providers and other stakeholders which received funding in 2006 to run a Lifelong Learning Network in the North of England. This highly successful body instigated a number of developments to meet LLN objectives. In addition to new curriculum developments, there were two flagship projects. Pathways provided information, advice, guidance and guaranteed interviews for vocational FE students seeking university places. Advance was targeted at learners in the workplace and their employers and was established with the aim of increasing HE provider responsiveness to employers and to make it easier for them to find out what is on offer at institutions.

It was clear from the work which United Alliance and other LLNs had been carrying out to identify and develop vocational progression routes into higher education that a new and effective means or channel of communication between learning providers and employers would be required. The Advance project sought to develop such a communication channel and to increase the provision of small, flexible, part-time, skills-focused HE modules that are responsive to employer needs and suitable for those already in employment. Effectively, it provided an on-

line one stop shop for HE training and development with a flexible framework which allowed for personalised programmes to meet business needs. The content was university branded and accredited and users could mix and match from different providers and pay as they learned.

The pilot phase began in 2009 with seven providers in total. These comprised one HE Centre, three HEIs, two large FE Colleges and a work based training provider. Thirteen employers (nine from the private sector) and fifty learners (thirty six adult learners and fourteen apprentices) took part and, in exchange for fee waivers, participated as consultants in the evaluation of the initiative.

The Advance portal presents employers and learners with information about modules on offer from the various providers and details of location, cost, delivery date and time et cetera. Learners, or their employers, can search for relevant provision and register an interest through the web site. Market research conducted for the United Alliance and represented in Figure 1 highlights key features of the resource.

MARKET RESEARCH
PERCEPTIONS OF ADVANCE SYSTEM

Most

Importance

Least

'Pick and mix' modules from different providers
Online access to module info/advice
Modules that meet business needs

Online one-stop module shop
Modules carry HE points or stand-alone
Incorporate in-house training into HE modules
Employers endorse modules
'Pay As You Go' module-by-module

Choose modules as needs arise
Plan/manage/record progress   Combination modules
Workplace modules   Change modules

Submit training needs
Train/support staff to mentor others   Online modules
GMSA acts as mediator   Modules taught at a uni/college/centre

Figure 1. Perceived importance of Advance features by employers

United Alliance spent considerable time prior to the pilot phase developing principles for CAT, and setting out how CAT could operate within and between member institutions. Credit in this context is the enabling mechanism underpinning the progression framework, enabling learning opportunities to be quantified in volume and level, and added together in meaningful ways to form larger awards. The intention was to enable learners to undertake professional development through small and specific units of study which they could subsequently build into larger programmes leading to qualifications. The learner would be able to choose from module offerings across the sub-region, and carry credit from one institution to another.

Although such an approach had already been recommended in other parts of the UK (See Johnson and Cundell, (2007), for example), Advance represents a first attempt to provide a scheme where learners can build their awards with a number of institutions simultaneously. Recognition of prior credit and franchise arrangements are to some extent already in place across the UK sector but Advance goes further in allowing the retrospective construction of a qualification. Whilst the Open programme offered by the Open University (OU), for example, offers a similar facility, all the credit the student brings is assessed, directly or indirectly, by the OU.,

It was clear that the ambition for Advance could only be achieved if the following fundamental questions could be addressed:

• Would institutions recognise credit from other member institutions without requiring an institutional appraisal of the sort usually associated with blanket credit recognition?

• Would QAA accept such extensive credit recognition without institutional appraisal?

• Would institutions increase the maximum amount of credit permitted from other institutions in arriving at an award?

A United Alliance CAT scheme was developed through extensive consultation with academics, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and a Heads of Quality Group. The underlying principle of Advance was that all HE credit, granted by HEFCE funded and QAA audited institutions was valid credit and therefore should be mutually recognised by United Alliance members. At this stage of the project, the focus was on recognition of generic credit (specific credit would be tackled at a later stage). Although the fundamental aims of providing more

flexible HE provision to work-based learners and their employers were acknowledged as worthwhile, some members were cautious about changing established practices, with one HEI perceiving Advance to be a potential risk to their brand and academic standards. However, whilst not all United Alliance HEIs participated in the pilot they all stayed closely involved through the Heads of Quality and other groups.

During this period, the United Alliance Director was an invited expert on a Joint Forum led by the QAA and the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA) to develop a common approach to credit between FE and HE that would support progression between the new Learning and Skills Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) into HE programmes. Whilst this phase of Advance was to focus purely on HE credit awarded by QAA audited institutions, future intentions were to extend the scheme to incorporate higher level credit awarded through the QCF.

In addition to CAT agreements, the project also required the development of shell awards and shell modules. Two universities agreed to be the initial awarding bodies that would support learners wishing to accumulate credit into an HE award. The QAA were consulted regularly through the development and the FEHQ formed the infrastructure for the range and shape of awards within Advance. Both awarding bodies changed their regulations to permit a higher percentage of external credit to count towards their awards. For one university two-thirds of the credits for an award may now be from other institutions; the other university now requires that only one third of the credits at the level of the award have to be from their university.

An important point to be aware of is that awards made through Advance are deliberately retrospective rather than the pre-planned prospective approach normally adopted for employer-led curriculum developments. Learners or their employers are not required to pre-plan a learning pathway of modules but will be able to select modules based on their personal or business requirements at that time. The Advance shell awards framework enables a learner to accumulate the credits from modules into awards. Clearly learner support and guidance are critical here but the key driver behind this approach was to deliver the ultimate flexibility for the employer and the learner. In the current economic climate where staff and businesses need to have greater flexibility, this approach is seen to be one of Advance's major assets.

A shell award is made up of a group of modules which the learner selects for themselves in negotiation with the awarding institution. United Alliance had the aim of working with member HEIs to create shell awards that would enable learners to build their own programme designs, drawing on modules from across the universities and colleges. Some of the modules would be based on accredited work-based learning. In essence, when choosing modules for a shell award, learners are creating their own programmes of study. To gain a shell award learners choose modules which relate to their professional and personal development objectives, and the resulting programme must be agreed through an approvals process operated by the university granting the award.

The two member institutions which had agreed to be awarding bodies collaborated with United Alliance in the design of shell award programmes at levels 4-7. Both institutions formally approved the proposals in principle but only one proceeded to full approval during the pilot project, integrating it into their existing Continuing Professional Development framework. The second HEI has made progress by further development of faculty based "Open Professional Awards" and continues to work towards a university-wide framework.

Evaluating advance

The evaluation of the project comprised work with three groups of stakeholders: providers, employers and learners. The approach taken drew on the Six Steps to Effective Evaluation (Glenaffric Ltd, 2007). Multiple methods of data acquisition were used, including reviews of relevant documentation (minutes, reports etc), questionnaires, interviews, focus groups and logging of relevant activity. In addition, three of the university providers undertook special projects to identify the specific institutional ramifications of participating in the pilot. The final evaluation report (Walsh, Margham and Grant, 2009) thus provides an in-depth review of all stages of the project and brings together the perspectives of all the stakeholders.

Demographic details of the learners are based on the 41 responses (from the 50 participants).The gender split was fairly even with 54% male and 46% female. The majority of apprentices were male and constituted the bulk of the 18-24 age category (51%) with 32%

between 40 and 55. 34% of the sample already had higher education qualifications and were studying post-graduate modules whilst 18% had lower than level 2, the rest having a variety of level 3 equivalences. In terms of work roles, the apprentices counted for 34% of the total, appearing in the 44% who self-identified as holding support or administrative roles compared to 56% in management or professional posts.

The sector breakdown of the cohort was, to some extent, determined by the modules available and the employers who had agreed to engage in the pilot. Six public service organisations accounted for the largest number of participants in the regeneration sector with an even spread across construction, education, health care, ICT, food manufacturing, retail and PR and marketing. The largest employer in the scheme had over 72,000 employees and the smallest, four. In all, five had fewer than 100, four between 100 and 1000, three between 1,000 and 10,000 and one over 10,000.

Data regarding the learner experience was acquired through three electronic surveys, one at the start of the course to highlight their concerns and issues, a second soon after to acquire demographic data, aspirations and expectations and one at end of course to evaluate different aspects of their learning journey. One group of learners also attended a focus group to explore in greater depth some of the issues raised by the survey data.

The attitudes and experiences of the thirteen employers were gathered through interviews at the start of the pilot and then again at the end. The first set of interviews were conducted face to face (one via Skype) at the point at which their learners were embarking on study but half of the second set were conducted by telephone or email at the end of the study period.

In this paper we are focusing on the learning for United Alliance and so inevitably focusing on the provider side. However, conceptions of learners and employers about the universities are equally important in ensuring that Advance is effective. We are therefore taking data from the final evaluation report, addressed in the next two sections, as well as the interim HEI projects, covered in section 4.3.

Employer perceptions

Of the thirteen employers involved in the pilot, six were found to already have positive perceptions of universities, primarily because of the quality and standards of the provision. These views were not altered by the experience as this quote indicates:

> "I think now universities are starting to listen to employers and adapt their delivery to meet the needs of employers. […] United Alliance is another positive. I think it's [Advance is] a really good programme …because it links up learning and that's key." (Employer participant response)

However, six with mixed views believed that HE was just not geared up to working with older learners seeking flexibility in study patterns:

> "How can I most tactfully put this? Some are more helpful than others. Some are more proactive than others about working in a commercial environment. Some are very much 'Well, this is what we're doing. If it doesn't suit you, tough." (Employer participant response)

> "Universities don't have a tremendous idea of customer care […] it's almost like being at school. Herd them over here and give them this, then herd them over there and give them that." (Employer participant response)

One employer believed that universities were only "on the margins" in their field of interest and averred that the expertise lay with the practitioners rather than academics. None of the employers' views changed significantly over the course of the project, suggesting that universities still have some distance to travel to enable effective employer engagement, as instanced in this, fairly typical view:

> "I think now universities are starting to listen to employers and adapt their delivery to meet the needs of employers. […] However, I think universities are still slow at responding and many are not very good at employer engagement." (Employer participant response)

Speed of reaction would seem to be still a major stumbling block for HEIs.

Learner perceptions

The learner experience seems to have been a positive one and in focus group discussions, learners stressed the value of an approach which combines manageability in terms of commitment, relevance to the workplace and portable credit. Some of the learners whose experience had been predominantly work-based or on-line expressed a need either for a more blended approach or greater interaction with tutors/other students at the beginning of the course.

Learner support was sometimes seen as confusing especially as learners tend to be busy and skim through information with which they have been provided. This links in with their view that university staff have only a limited appreciation of time and workload issues which impact on people trying to juggle paid work and study. It might be argued that in fact, most full time students are also juggling jobs with courses but work-based learners usually have less flexibility as they need to fit study in with their work rather than vice versa.

Learners were also keen to point out that available modules need to be relevant to their work and/or career aspirations and thus looked for more vocational provision. A common concern was that feedback from tutors was often delayed (a regular issue in the National Student Survey) and that key staff in institutions were often hard to contact. Attempting to work with two or more institutions exacerbated these issues and the different systems and lack of collaboration between institutions was noted.

University challenges

Four HEIs were involved in the project and supplied modules to the Advance module catalogue. University (U) A is a large, federated post-1992 insitution), UB a small former college of higher education, UC a large national distance learning provider and UE, a campus of a civic university located in a neighbouring county. These institutions have significantly different characteristics ranging from a large, faculty based, decentralised organisation to a relatively small specialist university centre. One of them already delivered all their courses in modular form and had effective course information management systems in place. In two institutions collection of this course information turned out to be surprisingly difficult. The United Alliance team were faced with a number of difficult challenges which separated into two types, selection of the right modules and obtaining relevant data.

Three of the universities received funding from United Alliance to conduct their own internal evaluations of their participation in Advance. These were led by identified champions, utilised internal focus groups and interviews with key staff in admissions, student registration, student support, quality offices and faculties offering modules and resulted in written reports which fed into the final evaluation report. Additionally, the institutional champions were interviewed separately about their own experiences and perceptions. Data and conclusions presented here are drawn from these sources.

With regard to the overall experience, UB referred to the amount of work involved in getting the institution on board:

> "A multi pronged PR exercise was essential to secure buy in from
> colleagues and think how the University could strategically respond
> to United Alliance module data requests." (UB participant response)

UA raised related issues about module choice, observing that

> "Shifting targets of what kind of modules required was very difficult
> and seemed random. I approached people to see what they had to
> offer and then had to say no thanks. It needed to be clear and
> consistent. The changes caused confusion and people felt they had

put effort in and had their time wasted, and were let down in not

being able to offer their modules." (UA participant response)

All institutions experienced difficulties with the actual data, either in obtaining it from dispersed systems or because of differences in mapping to Advance requirements. Channels of communication between the institution and United Alliance were also an issue.

However, there were a considerable number of other issues raised by the pilot. Future areas for development include the need for a single application process, a centralised source of information, advice and guidance, and the provision of localised induction and pastoral support. Existing systems mitigated against such things as registering a student to a module rather than a programme, providing them with a student card that did not expire at the end of every module, giving access to a personal tutor and personal development planning and recording a student's status at the end of module so that it did not affect progression data.

All these issues, and more, arise because conventional university systems are predicated on full-time study on programmes, which takes place within fixed terms and at fixed times. Economies of scale are achieved by having viable cohorts but these tend only to be known almost at point of delivery. Last, but not least, there was no costing and pricing mechanism available in some institutions and the prices quoted for modules varied from institution to institution even between faculties and programmes in the same institution.

Conclusions

The responses from learners and employers clearly demonstrate that Advance can meet the needs of businesses in providing high quality training and development. There was enthusiasm for the one stop shop approach to on-line provision of information about courses and for the potential to pick and mix between institutions. The evaluation work with learners revealed that 70% of students believed that taking the module had prompted them to think further about their long-term development goals, 46% were planning to take further modules, with a further 39% still considering, leaving only 15% who decided just to take the one module.

There are, however, still lessons for both United Alliance and the HEIs involved which will feed into future iterations of the project. Strategic issues include recognition of the need for an ongoing dialogue between partner institutions challenging the status quo, addressing barriers to change and building confidence over time which proved to be an effective method to achieving change at institutions. An unintended but fortuitous consequence was that the Advance project acted as a catalyst for change to institutions' own systems and processes associated with employer engagement and CPD type of activity. For institutions which already have a CPD focused infrastructure in place, additional resources to support Advance may be modest relative to the potential for increased revenue from entering new markets.

In terms of meeting employer and employee needs, it is clear that employers find it hard and time consuming to approach individual institutions and indicated a demand for a one-stop shop offered by Advance through both the portal and a central employer support service. However, the Advance portal and institutional processes are not yet sufficiently robust to positively exploit employers' expressed interest in learning opportunities beyond those contained in the Advance module catalogue, including employer requests for flexibly delivered modules. There is therefore a need to develop a central support service for employers that complements and adds value to the business development functions within provider institutions.

As we saw, population of the catalogue proved difficult and the labour intensive nature of module data input is unsustainable. An Advance Course Information Management System has been developed as has a standard data format to enable bulk upload eXchanging Course-Related Information (XCRI) and should be adopted to ensure that employer and learner expectations are not damaged by unavailability of timely module data. The worked concept of Credit Accumulation and Transfer also needs attention. The understandable caution that universities have towards accepting credit transfer from other HEIs required an investment of time to facilitate group discussions to address issues and concerns, share ideas and develop workable solutions with key staff in member institutions and with external bodies such as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). Nonetheless, Advance seemed to act as a catalyst for some institutions to review their rules governing the volume of credit imported into their awards from other HEIs. When this occurred, such institutions found they could make adjustments that would enhance progression opportunities through HE credit transfer and also improve alignment with their own

CPD strategy. Thus, as well as acting as a valuable vehicle for gaining HE awards through credit accumulation, the Advance shell award structure can prompt fresh approaches to the development and marketing of the institution's CPD programmes .

Finally, because Advance learners were not part of an ongoing programme at one institution, support for their initial and continued engagement in learning is not easily addressed by a single institution and would benefit from a neutral central information, advice and guidance service. However, provider institutions also have a key role to play in addressing the special needs of Advance learners enrolled on their modules and need to develop appropriate support systems to meet these needs.Investment also needs to be made in the further development of a central support service to provide cost-effective and independent advice and guidance to encourage the initial and continued engagement of Advance learners.

In 2008, Beer and Marr addressed the Higher Education Academy annual conference with a plea to re-imagine the student experience. Their thesis, that HE needed to change in order to better meet the needs of the 21st century learner made reference to many of the issues raised here. The need for flexibility in delivery, funding to follow credit and better support systems for part time learners are still priorities. If we are serious about continuing to widen access and offer equality of opportunity and outcome to all those with the potential to benefit, we must engage with the change agenda and continue grappling with ways to achieve social justice in higher education.

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Author biographies

Liz Marr is the Director of CIC (Centre for Inclusion and Curriculum, formerly the Centre for Widening Participation) at the Open University. CIC is responsible for supporting the implementation of the OU curriculum strategy, management of the Open programme and in the production and presentation of Openings courses, designed for less confident or disadvantaged learners new to HE. Prior to this, she worked in the Collaborative Partnerships Office at Manchester Metropolitan University where she led on widening participation and was actively involved with Lifelong Learning Networks and Aimhigher partnerships in Greater Manchester and Cheshire. She was a founder member of the Aimhigher Research Network in the North West and is managing editor of the journal Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning.

Cath Walsh has been Director of GMSA since May 2006 where she has overseen the development and management of the Greater Manchester Lifelong Learning Network. In her previous role as Higher Skills Development Director at Manchester Enterprises, Cath worked closely with the Greater Manchester Strategic Development Agency, universities, colleges and work-based learning providers to support the development of higher education programmes relevant to the higher skill needs of employers. Cath is committed to partnership working within the higher education sector, with external employer networks and other groups.

Mike Lomas worked as a chemist in a variety of production and technical management roles within the textile print sector before joining the University of Bolton (then Bolton Institute of Technology) in 1979. Ultimately Mike became Head of the School of Textile Studies, before undertaking the role of Associate Dean for the Technology Faculty. Subsequently Mike assumed responsibility for widening participation within the University and the development of academic partnerships within the UK. For the past two year Mike has been Director of Business Development and Partnerships. In this context Mike coordinates the University's academic partnerships within the UK and heads up the Business Support and Development Unit, through which many of the University's employer engagement activities are channelled.