

OCN London Access to HE Event.

Celebrating Inclusion and Achievement in Access to HE.

Tuesday 26 November 2019 @Morley College

Sue Betts – Executive Director Linking London.

How FE and HE partnerships can have a positive impact on inclusion and achievement in Access to HE.

Good afternoon – my name is Sue Betts, and I have been asked to talk about how further and Higher Education **partnerships** can have a positive impact on access and progression to higher education. I was delighted to be asked by Paul Browning to speak at this event in support of the 2nd World Access to Higher Education Day. I came to this event last year and went away ‘inspired’ by the stories of achievement often in the face of extreme adversity and this year is no different. So who am I and why am I here – well Access to HE holds a very fond place in my heart – in the early days of my career in FE we worked on a Humanities Access course which was extremely popular and in the early 1980s we developed an Access to Media course for ‘women only’ – at the time I’m not sure we realised quite how ground breaking that was. Anyway I am now the Executive Director of Linking London **a collaborative partnership of fifty institutions, hosted by Birkbeck, University of London – our partners are London universities, further education colleges and corporate members including the London Councils Education and Skills Team, OCN London, Pearson and unionlearn. The core aims of our partnership are to support recruitment, retention and progression through higher education, in all its variety.** We also have 32 associate members who represent all the

London Boroughs. **We started in 2006** and for those historians among you I'd like to tell you a short story of where we came from, which I think illustrates how we have tried to have a positive impact on progression leading to greater inclusion and ultimately achievement.

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) had decided after the inspirational Sir Colin Bell memorial lecture given by Sir Howard Newby in 2004 to invest in 30 **Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs)** across the country. They were to be set up as partnerships of FE and HE and their **main function** was to bring coherence to the 'neglected' vocational pathway for progression. The seminal text in 2005 by Brenda Little and Helen Connor 'Vocational ladders or crazy paving? Making your way to higher levels' had alerted **all** to the statistic that if you did A levels as your level 3 qualification you had an 80% chance of getting to HE (not surprising some of you may say given that A levels were set up by universities to aid their selection process) but that if your level 3 qualification was vocational your chances in some areas could be as low as 40% or even lower. HEFCE led the setting up of the LLNs with the help of huge business plan proposals, over a hundred million pounds and (remember numbers allowed to enter HE at this point were controlled, there was a cap on student numbers) a very useful pot of Additional Student Numbers designed to persuade universities to expand the number of vocational learners they recruited without altering their current intake of students. So with a £3.7 million grant, 35 partners, a project plan, Birkbeck as our host and no desk how do you set about ensuring progression for vocational learners? Well having recruited some staff, and getting desks, we started looking at the curriculum and mapped where the links already were that made sense (each LLN – there were five in London - had a sector area – ours was originally

Public and Community Services) however, there were also glaringly disconnected areas where getting to a degree pathway was almost impossible or at best took many years. We compared what we were trying to achieve to the standardisation brought about by the Railway Gauge Act of 1842 after two tracks (run by private operators) famously met and people realised they were working with different sized tracks. We also realised that our HE partners were not all, at that time, terribly familiar with qualifications other than A levels in the vocational pathway (BTEC Nationals, Access to HE, City and Guilds and Apprenticeships) or didn't perceive them as preparation for higher level study (cast your mind back to fourteen years ago – it is interesting to remember – someone told us they had even recruited a BTEC student once but never again!) – Andrew Jones my deputy and now Director of Linking London joined us in 2007 and his expertise in all matters relating to information, advice and guidance (IAG) was critical here.

1. The team did an awful lot of work trying to 'demystify' and raise awareness of vocational qualifications, they produced a routes into higher education postcard, a poster endorsed by SPA – Supporting Professionalism in Admissions, wrote supporting materials and produced a card game – which is still in use today!
2. Next we started using **Progression Agreements** as tools to enhance progression opportunities between our further education colleges and our universities. In some areas supported by additional student numbers, but often not, these worked well to show a student where the next step **COULD BE** and were extremely motivational, especially for older students. This was not to limit choice but to present some certainty and coherence to the student. The curriculum meetings between teams of staff from HE

and FE were some of the most fruitful staff encounters I had witnessed. And the promotional marketing occasions to celebrate the signing of the progression agreements were also a good opportunity to firm up collaborative working between our partners. By the end of the HEFCE funding period we had over **a hundred progression agreements** in place, supported by a toolkit and templates.

In year four HEFCE allowed us to continue as a partnership whilst using up the remainder of our grant and in 2010 they suggested that if our partners wanted us to continue they should supplement the remaining HEFCE grant by contributing to our running costs and they did. SO at the end of year 5 we produced '**IMPRESSIONS**' a publication containing evidence of what we had done: 35 new courses, 48 publications, 210 staff development events with 2,157 staff attending, but most importantly with 2,200 learners expected to benefit from these 100 Progression Agreements brokered by Linking London.

From 2011 we have been a partnership fully funded and supported by our partners, and we continue to be hosted by Birkbeck, University of London.

So what next?

3. **Data.** We realised that although we had done much in five years to help with the understanding of vocational qualifications and had improved some of the collaborative infrastructure we needed more INFORMATION and DATA about learners, in other words – **evidence**, so we commissioned Hugh Joslin and Sharon Smith from the University of Greenwich to do **two major pieces of research for us initially** – one piece looked at the

progression of college students in London to Higher Education 2004 – 2010 , and the other piece looked specifically at the progression of Advanced Apprentices into Higher Level Study. **This was an important moment in our work.** It told us a great deal about the role of Further Education in widening participation and it told us where those students were going to study higher education, how they did once they were there, it told us their ethnic background and gender, it also located them in terms of residency and POLAR quintiles – a proxy for levels of social classification. Several of our partners on the back of this work commissioned their own institutional reports which drilled down even further into the data. It led importantly to increased engagement with the Young Peoples Education and Skills team at London Councils. It also led to a **tacit recognition** that no one organisation or institution had the FULL PICTURE of London progression. London Councils also worked with Continuum at UEL to supplement their knowledge of the 875 schools in the capital.

Of course, external **CONTEXT** is important – and progression does not operate in a vacuum – in 2012 fees of up to £9,000 were introduced and additional student numbers of 15,000 for two years were put on the table by the funding council – we were keen to be able to track some of these changes and what it would mean for FE to HE progression.

So we went back to Hugh and Sharon for a **second report** which would take college learner progression beyond the introduction of £9K fees in 2012, to see if there had been an impact. A total of **221,500 level 3 achievers** were tracked. Between the first cohort in 2007 – 08 and the last in 2011 – 12 there was a 10% growth in numbers. **Access to HE numbers were up 24%** but

BTEC numbers nearly doubled. In the last cohort BTEC learners made up a third of the total and there were double the number of BTEC students than there were A level students.

Rates of progression were also higher for London than the rest of the country – for the first cohort 55% compared to an all-England college rate of 48%, when tracked longitudinally. Again **context is all** and we need to look at what was going on in the economy and the labour market – **2008 was not a good year** to be looking for work as an alternative to going to university.

Statistics from our report made it clear that both colleges and universities have a role to play in improving the **success rates** of the vocational students who progress, and evidence is crucial.

4. Our fourth development in terms of improving progression was to set up the Access to **HE Practitioner Group**

As you know the main route from FE to HE for adults is through the **Access to Higher Education Diploma** and we worked closely with OCN London (the Awarding Body) to ensure that our partners were up to date with recent changes. We run a practitioner group that meets three times a year – with thanks to Marissa Castilini who provides the OCN London input and Andrew Jones who organises it from our side. This has been a very successful group facilitating the sharing of information and changes in the Access to HE qualification. Over the last few years there have been MANY, designed to make the qualification more consistent across the country, to provide rigour and to ensure it remains a challenging but appropriate grounding for progression to higher level study. In 2013 the inclusion of the Access to HE Diploma in the UCAS awarding body linkage arrangement, permitting the results to be electronically submitted to

universities was an important development. While from 2017 the qualification was included in the new UCAS tariff. The plan being that admissions tutors will make more consistent and relevant offers, although we know from our work **that there are still improvements to be made**. As we speak Andrew and Marissa are preparing a guide for university admissions staff detailing HOW they can make meaningful offers. Linking London has also collaborated with OCN London on their website and provided content for access learners.

The waiving of the level 3 loan on successful completion of a higher level course is also a great incentive, if more was needed, for this group of learners to persevere and be successful.

This practitioner group enables a two-way dialogue between our partners and the awarding body - OCN London – new developments are run by the group for comment and this facilitates the general improvement in the running of the qualification by our colleges and enables universities to be knowledgeable about what is coming down the tracks.

5. At Linking London we have also pioneered **a collaborative offer for all our colleges** – this is where several universities team up to offer support where it is needed for Access to HE students. Birkbeck, University of London, for example, offers help with Maths, while others offer help with UCAS applications and personal statement preparation. Most recently Andrew and Emily have extended this collaborative offer to level 2 students including pre-Access and again this is working well.
6. Returning to the theme of Progression Agreements to facilitate more certainty for Access to HE students – we now have partners who have signed Progression

Agreements with the Awarding Body itself – OCN London. London South Bank University pioneered this work by starting to work collaboratively with OCN London to enhance the progression rate of Access to HE learners through **extended project work**, which acts as a transition activity leading to lower requirements for entry.

Building on this a **Progression Agreement** was signed for all OCN London students.

Other partners are following this and now both Goldsmiths and the London Institute of Banking and Finance have also signed progression agreements with OCN London. The advantages are obvious – this way all access learners in all London centres benefit. And as we know Access to HE students are more likely to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, be from black and minority ethnic groups, have known disabilities and have family or caring responsibilities. (Million+, 2012, p.7) there are over 5,000 in London. For universities and the ever higher government targets for widening participation (Johnson, 2015) this is a very important cohort of learners.

7. Finally on our journey to improve progression for Access to HE learners in October this year we ran an '**Access Your Future**' day at Senate House – twenty universities and one college exhibited there to support a day totally dedicated to Access to HE students. OCN London were there and provided much needed support as did our own Emily Harber – **over 300 students attended**. The feedback we received was excellent and I heard two comments that stuck with me from the day. One was a student saying 'it was great - a **day especially for us**'. The day was relevant and they did not have to listen to talks designed for younger students. The other comment I heard was a student saying 'oh

there are other Access students in London – I thought it was just us and one teacher’.

They saw themselves as part of a much larger community of learners for the first time.

So Linking London through these various strategies:

provides a place where new developments can be discussed and a place for sharing both difficulties and solutions

we use data to see what works and support the development of good practice, including work on retention and success

we provide a range of tools to support progression

we provide a brokerage role for our partners to collaborate with others across the capital and

we also act as an independent and objective voice.

We will continue to support our universities working with our further education colleges to ensure there is appropriate provision to further enhance widening participation in all our neighbourhoods and communities, while working to improve the progression and achievement of Access to HE learners.

Thank you for listening.

Sue Betts – Executive Director – Linking London.

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