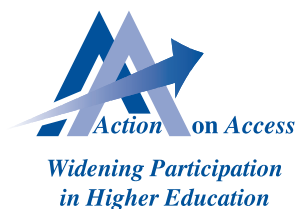


International Comparators of Widening Participation in Higher Education – Policy and Practice

*Canada – Widening participation
in rural and coastal areas*

Sue Hatt and Phil Harley

Series Editor: Mary Stuart



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1. Series Summary - the research project

Context

Widening participation in higher education remains a Government priority in the UK. Each country in the UK has taken a slightly different approach; Scotland particularly focusing on progression, Wales specifically on community engagement, and England especially on young people's access to HE. Widening participation in higher education is therefore a diverse field with many different issues to be addressed. When international comparators are examined the field becomes even more diverse.

Action on Access is the national co-ordinating team for widening participation for the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). The team comprises a dispersed team of researchers and practitioners in the field of widening participation in England. As part of our contract with the HEFCE, the team planned to undertake international comparator research into widening participation practice.

The purpose of this research is to inform policy and practice in England by learning from other similar situations (e.g. OECD countries¹) to build the research capacity of practitioners in the field of widening participation so that they can understand their practice context in relation to other practice contexts and to develop a broader base of research material for future use in the field.

Rationale - globalisation, widening participation and learning from others

Since the 1960s, inclusion in HE learning has been highlighted by different policy initiatives, most of which were concerned about equality of opportunity, whether that be equality for Black students as in the USA and South Africa, or greater equality for working classes as in the UK. The global imperative to create more qualified workforces grows out of a concern for economic competitiveness. High-modernity or late- or post-modernity means that the industrial heartlands of countries such as the UK and USA have been devastated and, in order to compete in an increasingly tough global market, knowledge and professional skill development are important to the future of our societies. Jobs are more uncertain and individuals take risks as they move through their employment career. Higher education is seen to be one element of insurance and protection against risk (Beck, 1992). Globalisation impacts on countries but more importantly on the people within countries and it affects their experience differently. What is certain is that the poorest face the most risks in our society. In the UK, attempts to ensure social equity in higher education have not been very successful. Despite the Robbins Report, (Committee on Higher Education, 1963) creating a new form of HE, the Polytechnics and the rapid expansion of HE numbers in the 1980s, the proportion of people from lower socio-economic groups has not increased. This means that they remain at risk of unemployment, of a less secure lifestyle, of less favourable life chances than their graduate peers, and their position in society remains focused on need rather than their ability to contribute. In England, a range of initiatives has been put in place in HE, from the Universities Funding Council in

¹ Although there are similarities between countries, there is no direct comparator, and it is important to take 'lessons learnt' with a degree of scepticism. It is not always applicable to transfer practice from one setting to another, though it is possible with caution to gain a better understanding of process, especially where countries have concerns about widening access.

1991 providing funding for work with 'educationally-disadvantaged groups of adult returners', through to the current funding for Aimhigher for school-age young people and Lifelong Learning Networks focusing on vocational routes into and through HE. Many of these ideas have been tried in other parts of the world and, while it is always difficult to make comparisons, it is worth investigating how others have tackled issues of equality in higher education. This research project attempts to do just that; to explore competitor countries' approaches to widening access and participation, their successes and their challenges. We hope that the reports will provide cautionary tales, suggestions and inspiration to try to develop policy and practice that can provide answers for the future.

Research methodology

The project is led by Mary Stuart, Associate Director: Research and Curriculum for Action on Access. The project methodology consists of a series of research visits to comparator countries to examine practice in relation to the areas outlined above. Each visit had a team of researchers from Action on Access and each team took a specific area of interest to widening participation policy or practice, while keeping an overview of all areas of the student lifecycle.

The research questions that were examined were based on a typology drawing on current UK government policy for widening participation using the student lifecycle model (Action on Access, 2003), which highlights stages of widening participation practice such as:

1. Pre-HE interventions Policy/Practice
2. HE Experience
3. Post-HE Employment/development/lifelong learning

At all times the central focus was on what can be learned from other countries' experiences. Five visits are being undertaken² and the teams are as follows:

- South Africa: Chris Duke, Bill Jones
- Australia: Geoff Layer, Mary Stuart, Rhiannon Evans
- Canada: Sue Hatt, Phil Harley
- Sweden: John Harvey, Beth Scott, Pat Rayfield
- USA: John Storan, Liz Allen, Lucy Solomon, Liz Thomas

All teams named a visit leader who was responsible for ensuring that the visit is successful and that the report was written. The visit plan was agreed between Mary Stuart and the visit team to ensure consistency and assure the quality of the research. Key contacts were identified in each country to ensure that appropriate interviewees were identified.

Each visit consisted of semi-structured interviews with key policy makers and practitioners involved in WP activities and visits and observations of WP work. Each team gathered data from the country concerned including policy documents, mission statements and relevant statistics, all of which are used in producing their reports.

² The chosen countries and the number of visits is based on comparability in relation to UK HE systems and approaches. These vary but all have a desire to widen access as well as to address practical matters such as time, affordability etc and therefore there is sufficient connection to the UK system to make comparison appropriate.

After each visit teams were required to complete a report on the visit and participate in a seminar to share their learning from the visit. This report forms the first of these international comparisons; further reports will follow later in 2005 and early 2006.

Mary Stuart, 2005

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2. Abstract

Canada, like Britain, is seeking to ensure that those with ability are able to access higher education and contribute to 'the economic and socio-cultural advancement of the state' (Dennison, 1997: 53). To achieve this objective without upsetting the public finances is a challenge for both countries and this report will highlight the ways in which the Canadian experience can offer lessons for Britain, especially for learners in rural and coastal areas.

This report presents the findings from a study of Canadian policy and practice in widening participation in HE undertaken on behalf of Action on Access. A mixed methodology was adopted including a literature review, text-based research and a field trip to Canada. Unlike England, Canada does not have a national 'system' for post-secondary education and so it was decided to focus on just two provinces - Nova Scotia and British Columbia - as they provided some interesting contrasts. Nova Scotia has universities distributed throughout the province whereas British Columbia's main universities are clustered in the Vancouver-Victoria area, with community colleges offering university-transfer courses in the outer reaches of the province. Although the post-secondary participation rate in rural British Columbia exceeds that in Nova Scotia, a higher proportion of young people graduate in Nova Scotia due to the difficulties rural residents in British Columbia experience with transferring to a different institution in an urban location.

The report highlights the importance of 'culture' in affecting HE participation, particularly for young men and those in rural and coastal areas. While distributed learning opportunities can improve access for learners in remote areas, the transfer system needs to be robust and constantly monitored if it is to serve the interests of all students while also maintaining high standards. The British Columbian transfer system enables students to proceed along academic routes moving between relatively homogeneous institutions. In this sense, it is not nearly as ambitious as the proposed Lifelong Learning Networks in Britain. Finally, with financial pressures high on the agenda, Canadian institutions are positioning themselves carefully to capture a share of an increasingly lucrative international market. The temptation to focus on prosperous overseas students rather than the social inclusion agenda is strong and serves as a warning for English universities as they enter a more market-based environment beyond 2006.

3. General Introduction

With respect to mass participation in higher education (HE), Canada is a step ahead of the UK. Each year approximately 1.3 million students enrol in HE in Canada representing about 40 per cent of those aged between 18 and 21 (Schuetze, 2000) while 43 per cent of the working population are qualified at tertiary level compared with only 27 per cent in the UK (OECD, 2004). The growth of Canada's post-secondary education system has been fuelled by the twin principles of social justice and economic restructuring and has been accompanied by a rise in educational attainment. Contrary to expectations, 'demand for post-secondary education...is still growing even if at a slower pace than in the roaring 1960s and 1970s' (Schuetze, 2000: 130).

During the past decade Canadians have enjoyed rising living standards due to a strong economy. Unemployment and inflation have been low while economic growth has been positive since 1992 and currently stands at 2.3 per cent. Continued prosperity is threatened, however, by an imminent change in Canada's demographic profile as the 'baby boom' generation approaches retirement age. The consequent fall in the working population relative to the dependent population implies that rising living standards will only be maintained by increases in productivity and competitiveness, a strategy which will be assisted by investment in human resources 'from early learning and childcare through higher education, skills training and lifelong learning' (Goodale, 2005: 3). Investment in higher education must, however, be tempered by fiscal prudence so that taxes stay low and a federal budget deficit is avoided.

Within this economic context, concerns about access, about vocationalism, market relevance and pressure on public finance have emerged as significant - albeit competing - drivers for change in higher education. Publicly funded institutions are expected to provide opportunities for all to develop their potential and contribute to 'the economic and socio-cultural advancement of the state' (Dennison, 1997:53) but to achieve this without making unreasonable demands upon the taxpayer. These issues also resonate within the British context, providing opportunities for us to learn from Canadian experience. The extent to which, and the ways in which, Canadian community colleges and university colleges have been involved in developing provision for learners in rural and coastal areas can be especially instructive. Whereas 41 per cent of Canadian post-secondary students are enrolled in a community college, the comparable figure for HE enrolment within Further Education Colleges in England stands at only 11 per cent. Although the ability to study locally for at least part of a degree programme can improve access especially for those in the remote rural and coastal areas, the extent to which this strategy 'democratises' HE is more debatable (Andres, 2001). The transferability of credit, the student advice and guidance system and the ability of learners to move beyond their locality to complete their studies all affect the success of this strategy. Reviewing British Columbian experience can provide some useful lessons.

4. Methodology

This report outlines the findings from a study of Canadian policy and practice in widening participation in HE undertaken on behalf of Action on Access. A mixed methodology was adopted including a literature review, text-based research into institutions' documentation and websites, and a field trip to Canada. The existing literature on widening participation in Canada was reviewed with particular reference to learners in rural and coastal areas. Given the provincial diversity of the Canadian education system, it was decided to focus on two provinces - Nova Scotia and British Columbia - as they provided some interesting contrasts. Indeed, they have been described as representing 'opposite ends of the continuum of post-secondary systems in Canada' (Andres and Looker, 2001: 3). Narrowing the focus enabled some distinctive themes to be explored in greater depth.

The literature review identified key researchers in youth trajectories in Nova Scotia and British Columbia while the text-based research established suitable institutions to visit during the field work phase. The 10-day study visit included interviews with 26 people, 13 of whom were based in Nova Scotia, 12 in British Columbia and one in Ottawa. The interviewees were drawn from 9 different institutions including universities, community colleges and high schools and included researchers, senior managers, teachers, admissions and recruitment tutors, student support staff and PhD students working in universities, community colleges and high schools. The interviews explored the issues that face students from under-represented groups before, during and after their HE experience. Some contacts were also established at a conference on *Ethics and Higher Education in Canada* attended by researchers from all Canadian provinces. The conference provided a broader perspective and contextualised the findings with respect to Nova Scotia and British Columbia. Most interviews were recorded and transcribed and the conference discussions were noted to ensure that the study visit captured a substantial body of evidence.

³ This is apart from Melbourne University which is now actively recruiting nationally.

5. Post-Secondary Education

From its very inception, responsibility for education in Canada was ascribed to the provinces (Cameron, 1997). As a result, although there are comparable structures and similar terminology, in practice each province has adopted different arrangements about HE access, curricula, student mobility, degree granting and planning (Schuetze, 2000). As a result, there is virtually no articulation across provincial boundaries and credits are not fully portable. Within each province, the number, size, location and mission of the post-secondary institutions has arisen from a combination of historical accident and policy preferences. This structural framework is 'a critical but often overlooked dimension in studies of access to post-secondary education' (Andres and Looker, 2001: 3) in Canada and has far-reaching implications for students.

Universities are well established with their origins dating back, in some provinces such as Nova Scotia, to the eighteenth or nineteenth century. They have both research and teaching functions and can award undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral degrees and some also confer diplomas and certificates. University colleges are primarily teaching institutions offering certificates, diplomas and taught degrees. The community colleges have a more defined role than English Further Education Colleges as they cater exclusively for post-secondary age groups. Although they are more vocationally-orientated and community-focused than the universities, in Alberta, Quebec and British Columbia, community colleges also have a university-transfer role offering academic courses for students in the first two years of their undergraduate degrees. These general arts or science courses are acceptable for transfer to universities but the community colleges do little to promote movement from vocational to academic routes. The interviews suggested that, with the exception perhaps of Quebec, post-secondary vocational education is regarded as appropriate for those who are not able to succeed on academic courses.

Post-secondary students in Canada pay tuition fees to their institution and these will vary depending upon the type of institution at which the student chooses to enrol. For example, in British Columbia, fees for university-transfer courses within a community college are substantially lower than fees for equivalent courses at a university and the price differential can influence a student's choice of study location. Bursary and fee-waiver schemes are available for certain categories of students that the university wishes to attract and these will vary to reflect the mission of the institution. In addition, there are some federal or provincial schemes to encourage university participation by under-represented groups, such as the Youth Transition Programme in Nova Scotia that assists indigenous Canadians of African descent. For Canada's aboriginal or First Nation people - that is those whose ancestors were already in Canada before the white settlers arrived - learners can sometimes receive generous grants from the resources of their bands or tribes, although this depends upon the resources available to the community. Despite these awards, post-secondary education in Canada is expensive and is undoubtedly an issue affecting those from low-income backgrounds. Although rising tuition fees may not be a deterrent to the majority of potential learners, they can present a significant barrier for those with little tradition of accessing HE such as people with low income or low socio-economic status.

Within the Canadian context, groups that are under-represented in HE include students from the First Nations, from lower socio-economic backgrounds and with disabilities (Dennison, 1997; Schuetze, 2000). For these learners, access to higher education is constrained by finance, timetabling, and restrictions on mobility and access. Those learners in remote rural areas are also recognised as facing particular barriers such as low

educational attainment, lack of employment opportunities, distance and access, compounded in many cases by low socio-economic status. One interviewee, for example, reported that:

the socio-economic is very divided by urban-rural and, within the urban area, the kids have a different sense of familiarity with higher education.

In the interviews, Canadians were more comfortable with discussing under-representation in terms of aboriginal (First Nation) students rather than socio-economic status. Although each aboriginal 'band' displays unique characteristics, the main issues with respect to higher education focus around prior educational attainment, housing, distance and culture.

Their issue with education is that they don't see the benefit. They see education as taking away their language, taking away their culture, taking their kids away from the community...

For First Nation students, although the availability of appropriate housing can present a particular issue, the overriding concern is about the extent to which their cultural values and beliefs are respected within the education system. One interviewee from an aboriginal community referred to the dominant discourse as one in which education has been perceived as:

dealing with the Indian problem.... It was problematising in that we were the deficit, that indigenous people had something wrong with them because we weren't, you know, quite 'getting it' in a white way.

In response, provinces have developed specialist provision in terms of schools, colleges, programmes and outreach initiatives that cater exclusively for aboriginal students. Some of these are very creative in the ways in which they use aboriginal instructors to plan, recruit and deliver programmes specifically targeted to the needs of these communities.

British Columbia

British Columbia and Nova Scotia have very different post-secondary structures. British Columbia has an extensive range of post-secondary institutions including both public and private universities, university colleges and community colleges. The province covers an extensive geographical area but has a population of just under 5 million people, at least half of whom reside in the Vancouver or Victoria area, where the three main universities are located. In most of the province, the population density is low and travelling time to the lower mainland is considerable. To serve the educational aspirations of its dispersed population, British Columbia has developed a sophisticated system of articulation arrangements between its community colleges, university colleges, universities and institutes within the framework of the British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer (BCCAT). The aim is to promote seamless progression between the various kinds of post-secondary offerings so that students can start their courses with the knowledge that, provided they choose wisely, they will be able to transfer credits between institutions. Indeed, despite concerns from colleges about the ways in which transfer-students can only access programmes with space to spare, a system in which 92 per cent of students are able to transfer to the institution of their choice while 94 percent are accepted onto their preferred programme of study (Centre for Education Information Standards and Services (CEISS), 2003) would seem to be meeting these expectations.

The universities' concerns about quality assurance and standards have been addressed in two ways: firstly, through a series of articulation committees and, secondly, through research into student performance. The 70 articulation committees represent the main academic disciplines and involve teaching staff from each delivering institution. They are required to meet at least once per year to review the curriculum and explore the implications of curricula changes on student progression and transfer. Above all, these annual meetings help to establish a network amongst those who teach the students so that informal channels of communication are established enabling emerging issues to be resolved at an early stage. The articulation committees help to maintain quality by keeping the curriculum aligned so that students can move smoothly between institutions.

As part of its mandate to facilitate admission, articulation and transfer, BCCAT has undertaken research into the completion rates and the performance of transfer students compared with those who began their studies at university (CEISS, 2003; Cowin 2004; Heslop, 2004). During the 1990s, approximately 40 per cent of BC university entrants progressed from community colleges and the transfer system served them well (Cowin, 2004).

Many students have transferred, they have done so with ease and they have achieved bachelor's degrees with much the same success as students who enrolled in university directly from secondary school (Cowin, 2004: 1).

Although community colleges are prepared to admit students with lower grade point averages than universities, for some high-achieving students the community college will be the preferred route. For example, students choose to start their studies at the community college when they find it difficult to leave their local area, when they are under financial pressure and wish to remain at home for part of their course, or when they want the supportive teaching environment that the community college can offer. Research (Heslop, 2004) suggests that students with comparable results in high school achieve similar grades in their final years at university regardless of the route through which they have entered the system. Direct entry from secondary school and community college transfer are:

both viable routes to a degree...Whichever route is chosen, students can be confident that they are not likely to be disadvantaged for having chosen it (Cowin 2004: 3).

These research findings have helped to establish credibility for the transfer system and to allay fears that transfer will undermine standards by permitting students of inferior quality to progress to university.

Nova Scotia

In contrast, the early establishment of universities in Nova Scotia has resulted in a post-secondary system rich in universities but with limited links among different types of post-secondary institutions (Andres and Looker, 2001). Nova Scotia's HEIs grew up in piecemeal fashion during the nineteenth century and many universities originated as denominational institutions. The result is that there are many institutions distributed across the province, so that Nova Scotians are aware of and value their local university. Indeed, the interviews confirmed that there is a 'culture of learning' in the province. Each university has 'a specialised purpose or particular catchment demographic for its students' (Christie, 1997:

p223). This was borne out in the interviews with references to the ways in which each university positions itself to serve particular interest groups, such as disabled students, indigenous Canadians of African descent or First Nation students.

In many ways, Nova Scotia has a remarkably successful university system with the highest participation rate in Canada, provision widely dispersed across the province and a tradition of serving the community that makes HE very accessible. Cape Breton University, for example, was described by one interviewee as the:

university for the people...people are not uncomfortable to come into this institution.

On the other hand, the easy availability of university places has limited the development of the community college system. Although the College of Nova Scotia has developed considerably in recent years and offers a range of post-secondary vocational programmes, awareness of these opportunities has been slow to develop in a society that places a high value on university education. The community college does not offer university-transfer courses and, indeed, one university was looking to establish a pilot university-transfer link with a college overseas rather than with the College of Nova Scotia.

The other issue for Nova Scotia is that their university system is extremely expensive to maintain and, without economies of scale, institutions struggle both to provide cost effective programmes and to maintain their international reputation. Although Nova Scotia has more university places per capita than any other province, this will be hard to sustain in the face of rising costs and adverse demographic trends. The number of young people is falling and as one interviewee put it:

We were running out of people.....we would be out of business because we are seeing out migration, decreasing numbers of people graduating from high school....

In this environment, universities are intensely aware of their competitive position, differentiating their brand and cultivating contacts with their strongest markets through visits to schools, campus visits, summer camps and so on. In most cases, this outreach work is focused on marketing and institutional recruitment rather than generic aspiration-raising and most work is focused on the final school year. At Cape Breton University, however, there was evidence of generic outreach work with younger age groups and the wider community. Within that institution, it was recognised that widening participation involves breaking 'down the myths' about who does and does not go to university. When they ran summer camps, at first the university was only reaching a small part of the community.

Initially we had the doctor's son, the doctor's daughter coming in...and the life and soul of Cape Breton is the low-income groups.... When they would walk in, we would make them feel comfortable. We would do programming that was educational and fun. That was the key thing and was inclusive and made everyone feel that they mattered.

In this case, respect for the learners went as far as accepting that another institution might be their ultimate destination. As one interviewee put it:

we are first and foremost interested in them going to university. We hope they choose Cape Breton University but we know that...I mean I have sat down and helped people fill out student loan forms for Dalhousie University.

6. Secondary Education

In both Nova Scotia and British Columbia, high schools have responsibility for providing secondary education for young people up to the age of 21 in Nova Scotia and 19 in British Columbia. Although some young people drop out of school before they graduate, those within the school-age group have the right to return to school to complete or upgrade their high school graduation diploma - and some take advantage of this opportunity. The community colleges cannot award a high school graduation diploma and, although they will provide adult education of equivalent standard to high school provision, they are careful not to take responsibility for young people who are able to return to school. University entrance depends upon marks students attain at high school, in a predominantly academic curriculum. Grade requirements will vary depending upon the course and institution and for some courses there will be more specific requirements; for example Year 12 Maths or English. High school graduation is, in all senses, a rite of passage into post-secondary education.

In both Nova Scotia and British Columbia, schools indicated that more and more students were turning towards community colleges as their preferred option. Good relations had been established with local community colleges and teachers were promoting them on an equal footing with universities. The recognition that community college courses might give better job opportunities and less student debt is proving a powerful driver. One effect of this has been for the colleges to raise their entrance requirements and potentially drive out young people with lower qualifications, and indeed this can motivate young people to return to high school to improve their grades. Whether the demand for more vocational courses will succeed in raising the status of community colleges in terms of the place to go for high-achieving high school graduates remains to be seen.

Evidence suggests that there are barriers to participation in post-secondary education in Canada, particularly for those from low income groups.

the participation rate for 18 to 24 year olds from families with incomes of \$100,000 or more was double that of individuals from families with incomes of \$25,000 or less. (Statistics Canada, 2003 cited on www.abrightfuture.ca)

Canada does not have a national programme such as Aimhigher to support generic HE aspiration-raising work in schools to address these issues. Initiatives take place at provincial or institutional level to work with particular target groups as they approach the point of HE entry. For example, the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation, a registered charity, runs the AVID (Advancement via Individual Determination) Project involving around 600 students in British Columbia. The programme looks to address three key issues of misinformation regarding post-secondary education, expectations of insufficient financial resource and inadequate scholastic preparation. Another private, independent organisation, the Canada Millennium Scholarships Foundation, carries out research into access issues and provides scholarships and bursaries. The group receiving the most support is First Nation students, perhaps because they are easy to recognise as a group that is under-represented in higher education.

Only 35 per cent of First Nation people had a post-secondary qualification, compared with 52 per cent of the rest of the population (StatCan, 1999)' (Schuetze, 2000).

Transition and scholarship programmes such as 'Test Drive' in Nova Scotia allow visits both to and from higher education institutions as well as mentoring and talks from role models. A similar programme for Black African Nova Scotians brought successful adults into school

to talk to black students at risk of failing to graduate. In Nova Scotia the ACEES programme recognized that high school graduation was not necessarily sufficient preparation for university for all students. It provides an additional year-long course in less 'mainstream' subjects to help the transition to university, community college or employment.

In the urban and suburban areas of Nova Scotia, high schools and universities rely on a strong culture of education and an awareness of economic decline to motivate young people to progress with education. In rural areas and disadvantaged urban areas where there is no parental culture of higher education, progression rates are lower. The difference between the progression rates to post-secondary education were quite wide even between the schools visited for this study. A suburban school in Halifax, for example, claimed that about 80 per cent of their high school graduates progressed to post-secondary education, with approximately one in every four going on to community college, and this compared favourably with a very successful school on the east side of Vancouver that sends only 35 per cent of students into post-secondary education, 7 per cent lower than the British Columbia average. Despite the fact that in the school in Vancouver there were 52 different languages spoken the groups targeted in both schools are the same though the school in Nova Scotia appeared to have greater access to support programmes.

Financial support for educational progression is limited in high school and tends to be focused on particular groups at post-secondary level. The school in Vancouver made the point that many cultural groups offered scholarships to their students for continued education. In a school with 52 languages this was a significant source of encouragement. Although Year 12 students could access scholarships and bursaries in anticipation of post-secondary education, there was only one example of financial help for school students. This was for disabled students whose disability was well documented by the school to aid the transition into higher education. There is nothing comparable to England's Educational Maintenance Allowance, perhaps just one symbol of differing cultural attitudes. A high school graduation guide had high expectations about student self-motivation and began its post-secondary options section with the words:

Post secondary programs are expensive and some students decide to take time away from study following graduation from high school (Lockview High School, 2005)

In an environment where young people are expected to make the most of their opportunities, finance might affect the timing and mode of study but is not expected to deter students from participation in post-secondary education.

Schools demonstrated a commitment to providing objective career advice and tried to avoid initiatives privileging a specific institution. The status of the career information assistant in high schools appeared high and was core to the curriculum. At the Vancouver Technical School, one interviewee noted that:

because .. one person's career changes an average of seven times in their lifetime, they need to be exposed to a broad range of possibilities because they will make other choices after they make the first HE step after high school.

7. Learners in Rural and Coastal Areas

Those who live and work in rural and coastal areas are less likely than their urban counterparts to progress to HE in both Canada and the UK (Andres and Looker, 2001; Atkin, 2003). Rurality is often defined by what it is not, rather than by what it is. Rural areas are those that do not have high-density populations, are 'non-urban' or represent 'the opposite of citification' (Andres and Looker, 2001: 39). This is dangerous territory as it can lead to policy initiatives, designed for a predominantly urban majority, being applied inappropriately to those in rural areas. For example, those who live in rural and coastal communities often have a strong cultural identity, rooted in their sense of place and belonging (Atkin 2003). They are reluctant to participate in HE if it means going away to university as this seems like 'a ticket out' (Atkin, 2003; Andres and Looker, 2001). In Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, this sense of place was particularly strong and residents regretted that 'our biggest export is graduates'. The interviews reflected the fact that cultural as well as geographic distance was recognised as an issue for those living far from universities in both Canada and Britain. In British Columbia for example, one interviewee considered that:

people who grow up in those northern communities maybe feel much more connected to their families and their roots and so on and just are not that comfortable in the city...

The lived experience of these rural dwellers makes it hard to recognise the relevance of HE. Indeed in Nova Scotia and British Columbia where resource-based industries, such as lobster and salmon fishing, construction and lumber-jacking, still provide lucrative but low-skill employment, young people are drawn out of education even before high school graduation. In places like Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, the loss of fishing, mining and the steel industry has left a declining economy offering few opportunities for graduate employment. One interviewee reflected this perspective clearly with the words:

The young people of Cape Breton, they understand very well that coal mining is dead, steel is dead and fishing is not what it used to be.

Against this background, Nova Scotia and British Columbia have very different approaches to rurality and post-secondary education. The deliberate attempt by British Columbia to establish a community college system offering university-transfer courses contrasts with Nova Scotia's dispersed universities offering widespread, but not universal, access to post-secondary opportunities. A smaller proportion of rural youth enter HE in Nova Scotia than in British Columbia, but those that do enrol are more likely to graduate. In rural areas, the graduation rates are 23 per cent in Nova Scotia compared with only 17 per cent in British Columbia (Andres and Looker, 2001).

British Columbia's system has eased initial access for rural residents via the university-transfer role of community colleges. The community colleges have established satellite campuses and learning centres to ensure that learning opportunities are distributed across the province. Some of these outreach facilities are very small and struggle to enrol sufficient students to make their provision viable, especially when they are within travelling distance of the Vancouver area. University-transfer should in principle promote equality of opportunity by enabling students who might otherwise be unable to access HE study to begin their studies in a community college and then transfer to complete at a university. Research (CEISS, 2003) indicates that nearly half of those who complete their programmes at community college continue their studies and that the overwhelming majority are able to enrol in their preferred programme of study. Nevertheless, 'the transfer experience is not

unproblematic' (Andres, 2001: 38) as students can find transfer difficult to negotiate and experience difficulties before, during and after the transfer process. As one interviewee said, for students who begin their studies at a community college:

There's so many things they have to look at. They need to get a special letter, they need to get one, two and maybe three transcripts, make sure they apply and all these thingsThey have to grow up a little bit quicker than those who start at university.

Even though BCCAT has taken steps to ensure that the transfer process is clearly outlined and sound advice is provided, it is inevitably more complicated than starting in university direct from high school and progressing within one institution. Although BCCAT provides clear and accessible advice, such as *British Columbia Transfer Tips* (BCCAT, 2005), this does not always trickle down to the students. BCCAT is in constant dialogue with students and colleges to improve the quality of their information, the formats in which it is available and its timing so that information can be accessible whenever, wherever and however the student finds most convenient.

In addition, there are particular issues for transfer students from distant locations who sometimes have difficulty adjusting to the unfamiliar city environment when they transfer to universities on the lower mainland. As one interviewee said:

It seems to me that there is a certain distance that is ideal for establishing a university intake or transfer programme and there's some that are too far away and there's some that are too close...

The transfer to a different institution, in a distant location in an urban environment can act as a barrier to successful completion even when a student's academic progress is satisfactory. To counter the rural transfer issue, some community colleges in British Columbia have recently attained university college status to enable them to offer the full four years of a degree programme in a location that is more accessible for students residing in the outer reaches of the province.

One difference between Britain and Canada concerns school achievement in rural areas. Whereas in England, low achievement in secondary school is most acute in inner city areas, in both Nova Scotia and British Columbia, high school grades are inversely related to distance from the city. In Canada:

living in a rural area appears to influence perspectives and outcomes, with rural youth having lower educational expectations and attainments than other youth (Andres and Looker 2001: p36).

The interviews attributed low attainment to the difficulties of attracting and retaining high-calibre teachers in remote rural and coastal areas combined with the educational status of the parents. Andres and Looker (2001) found that Canadian young people from rural areas had lower educational expectations and attainments than their urban peers even when controlling for parental education, gender and academic stream.

In both Britain and Canada, encouraging more young people from rural and coastal areas to participate in HE is about the nature of the provision and its location. HE provision that is sensitive to the needs of those in rural and coastal communities should be local, accessible and, above all, relevant to local labour markets and local communities. As Atkin (2003) notes:

to date the provision of post-compulsory educationin rural areas has been all about access ... rather than considering a content more appropriate to rural learners (p516).

There were some good examples of appropriate programmes in both Nova Scotia and British Columbia, for example Environmental Technology at Cape Breton University, where they have the infamous tar ponds, a legacy of the steel industry. Similarly, Wilderness Leadership at Squamash Campus of Capilano College and the Event Co-ordination certificate also at Squamash Campus relate to the proximity of the campus to Whistler, the venue for the 2010 Winter Olympics. These institutions were looking to the international, as well as the local, markets and were seeking to establish niche programmes so that they would become a destination campus. The Scuba Dive Instructors certificate at the Sunshine Coast Campus of Capilano College also provides a good example of this strategy.

In both British Columbia and Nova Scotia as in England, young men are less likely than young women to continue in education. The lure of resource-based employment combines with cultural pressures to deter young men from educational progression. In Nova Scotia, several interviews referred to the western shore where lobster fishing provides a lucrative family business opportunity for those with quotas. In these communities, boys will leave school before high school graduation or even be kept home from school to help lift the lobster pots during the short season. In other cases when traditional industries have disappeared, young men are placed in something of a dilemma between their expectations and the available opportunities. In Nova Scotia, for example, one interviewee reported that:

There is a masculine ideology undoubtedly....Along the eastern shore...farming, fishing communities, it was the males who saw themselves assuming the role of worker. They were looking at employment but not looking beyond the community and it seems that their base for success would be largely in the community. Well, obviously the employment is no longer there but they're still hanging on to that....This, of itself, is a huge gender issue.

8. Lessons to be Learned

'Culture' is an important factor affecting HE participation

In Canada as in Britain, people's expectations, values and ideologies are grounded in the communities in which they live, and these cultural influences impact on the HE participation of under-represented groups. The 'culture of masculinity', for example, lies at the heart of engaging working-class young men in education and this is also reflected in research in Britain on urban working-class men (Archer et al, 2003). Similarly, the 'rural mindset' affects the expectations of rural youth and the fear that education will take them away from their communities is very strong amongst those from First Nation communities. Developing provision that is appropriate to the needs of these communities, that will help people to realise their aspirations in a changing economic context without necessarily requiring them to leave their community, is key to ensuring that young people from under-represented groups have equal opportunities to access higher education.

Distributed learning opportunities improve access for learners in rural areas

The experience of both Nova Scotia and British Columbia illustrates the importance of providing distributed learning opportunities for learners in rural and coastal areas. In Nova Scotia, the relative ease with which most residents can access HE contributes to the high participation rate and a high graduation rate. In British Columbia, with the community colleges and their distributed learning centres, the HE entry rate is even higher than in Nova Scotia. The graduation rate, however, is lower than in Nova Scotia largely because of the difficulties of transfer both in terms of the process and the location. It is yet too early to know whether graduation rates will rise following the recent establishment of university colleges in remote parts of the province so that students can complete their degrees without moving to an urban environment.

Credit transfer and the maintenance of standards

British Columbia provides evidence that widening participation does not necessarily involve a reduction in standards. British Columbia has been operating a university-transfer system for long enough to have tracked student progress through from community college to university completion. The evidence (CEISS, 2003; Cowin, 2004; Heslop, 2004) shows that students who start their university studies at community colleges and then transfer can achieve graduation outcomes similar to those of comparable students who entered university direct from high school and that most students who want to transfer are able to do so satisfactorily.

Although this experience is useful for England, especially in the context of the emerging Lifelong Learning Networks (Newby, 2005), it is not directly comparable, firstly because transfer in British Columbia is via an academic route and secondly because of the relative uniformity of British Columbia's post-secondary institutions. With respect to the first point, university-transfer courses in British Columbia are usually general arts or science courses and articulate with the academic provision at the universities. They are not attempting to build routes for students to negotiate the vocational-academic divide nor to progress to degree standard by a vocational route. Indeed, the interviews indicated that it is more usual for graduates to seek a post-graduate professional qualification than for apprentices to progress to a degree programme. Secondly, the success of British Columbia's transfer

system depends partly upon the fact that their post-secondary institutions have established trust in each others' standards and are therefore prepared to accept students transferring with credit. The interviewees at BCCAT recognised that trust rests partly upon the absence of hierarchy in the post-secondary system and that this would be more difficult to establish in the UK.

Tips for a credit transfer system

A well-articulated credit transfer system requires:

- a **commitment to a robust framework** that establishes arrangements for transferability, equivalence, standards and process so that students, colleges and universities work within a clear and transparent framework.
- **articulation committees** that engage academics at the discipline level. These mechanisms ensure the engagement of academic staff at the discipline level as they will be the people to deliver the curriculum, support the students, mark their assignments and take decisions about whether or not a student passes the module. Without their active engagement in the design, delivery and maintenance of the curriculum, the particular needs of these distinct groups of students could be overlooked.
- a **well-informed student advice and support system** offering timely advice available in a variety of media. Successful transfer between institutions is inevitably more complicated than direct progression within one institution and students need information about which courses transfer to which programme and institution at a time when they are grappling with these decisions. Ideally, quality information should be available face-to-face, in hard copy and on the web so that students can access the information in the format and at the time that they find most convenient.
- a **research base** to provide feedback on the quality of the student through-put and the transfer system. The small but focused research programme of BCCAT helps to establish credibility in the transfer process. In addition, the research evidence about current practice has been fed back into improving the system for the benefit of the next student generation.

The international market as a lucrative recruitment opportunity

When recruiting in a competitive market, institutions will target international students rather than try to widen participation in the domestic market. The fees from international students offer a strong incentive for cultivating the international market and well-qualified students are cheaper to support and teach. In Nova Scotia and British Columbia, there were many examples of internationalisation at all levels of the education system from high school to university. One institution had changed its name to ensure its position in the international market; another was piloting a university-transfer programme with a college overseas; community colleges were seeking to establish themselves as destination campuses for niche programmes such as Scuba Dive Instructors or Wilderness Leadership; and all the institutions we visited had international links that they were cultivating carefully. The market logic is clear; indeed economic theory predicts that in a segmented market, suppliers will compete with each other in the more profitable segments rather than seeking to ensure full market coverage by reaching into the less profitable areas. As English universities enter a more market-based environment beyond 2006, the temptation to focus on the profitable international agenda rather than social inclusion could be strong.

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Notes



Further information

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