

# **College Connect: Enhancing the Evidence Base for Articulation**

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## **Introduction**

This paper considers the importance of research to increase our understanding of the growing linkages in Scotland between sub-degree level higher education (HE) provision delivered within colleges, such as Higher National Certificates and Diplomas (HNC/Ds), and degree study at university, in particular on the learning and teaching experiences of students studying in both settings. The paper provides an overview of previous research undertaken by the author which has informed policy-making in the area of articulation (advanced entry by Higher National (HN) students into levels 2 and 3 of a four-year degree in Scotland) and whether current research, aligned to the objectives of Glasgow Caledonian University's (GCU) new College Connect Strategy 2013-2020, can contribute to the development of a new holistic model of tertiary education delivery to prepare students for the transition from college into university and further enhance their student experience.

## **From HN to Degree Study: The Impact of Previous Research**

One of the key areas of work undertaken by the Greater Glasgow Articulation Partnership (GGAP), one of six Articulation Hubs in Scotland set up by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) in 2008, was to generate evidence to inform and support the articulation development work undertaken through the Hub. Research conducted by colleagues within GCU has contributed to informing discussions at a national policy level on strengthening the routes between colleges and universities. Initial research in particular provided evidence of the increasing importance of HNC/Ds being used by students to progress into degree level study. The GGAP funded HN Tracking Study tracked whether students, after completion of their HN programme, entered employment, progressed to degree study or both. Evidence showed that in many subject areas a majority of HN students were now using their qualifications to progress to degree level study (Ingram and Gallacher, 2011). This research adds credence to the growing recognition that in many countries HE courses, such as HNC/Ds, have a growing range of functions (Parry, 2009). While many of these programmes and qualifications were developed initially with a clear function of helping educate and train people for specific occupational areas, often at intermediate level rather than the higher professional level occupations, they are increasingly being used as 'transitional' qualifications, which enable students to progress to bachelor level degree qualifications. This is also often associated with initiatives to widen access to HE (Gallacher *et al*, 2009).

In the Tracking Study the progression to degree study was evident in a particular number of HN subject areas, namely Social Sciences, Business and Computing. These subjects along with Engineering, which has particular transition issues with respect to Mathematics, were identified as appropriate programmes to undertake the next phase of GGAP research to explore in more depth students' transition experiences as they move from college into university. The research, which has informed current national policy in the area of articulation, gathered evidence on: making the transition from the college into the university environment; academic literacies and curricular issues. The study identified a number of issues and put forward a set of recommendations to further enhance the transition experience of students (Ingram and Gallacher, 2013).

### **College Connect: Researching the College and University Interface**

Whilst the second phase of research was important in enhancing our understanding of the transition experiences of students moving from college into university, the development of GCU's College Connect Strategy 2013-2020 enables us to evaluate the impact of a new holistic model of tertiary education delivery to prepare students for this transition. The Strategy underlines GCU's commitment to articulating students and builds on the articulation work, including the establishment of a strong evidence base, developed by GGAP and adopts a holistic approach built around three broad objectives: enhancing the student experience of articulation; enhancing partnership working for articulation and enhancing the evidence base for articulation

With respect to the third objective a robust evidence base will be developed to inform articulation at institutional *and* national levels and to ensure an enhanced student experience. One of the guiding principles of the Strategy is to 'assist college students' preparation for, transition to, and achievement at university' (GCU, 2013). The overall aim therefore of the current phase of research which has recently commenced, preliminary findings from which will be presented at the conference, is to explore the effectiveness of learning and teaching support processes to facilitate the successful engagement, transition and progression of articulating students. A central tenet of this research will be to assess the impact and success of the Associate Student Scheme. The aim of this Scheme is to cultivate in HN students a sense of belonging and identity with the University prior to entry, as well as preparing them for degree level study.

The research is exploring students' level of awareness of the Scheme whilst studying for their HN in college, and their expectations of what they will gain from it. Furthermore, it investigates whether being part of the Scheme makes these students more motivated to both successfully complete their HN course and to undertake degree study at GCU. Importantly, how do these students, whilst at college, view *themselves* - as college students, university students but based at college, or both? By exploring these themes, in particular focusing on issues of learner identity and experiences,

we can evaluate the efficacy of College Connect and assess whether the aim of establishing a joined-up HE system in Scotland to further enhance the student experience can be achieved.

## **Conclusion**

GCU has increasingly recognized the importance of research to enhance our understanding of the learner journey of those students who undertake HN study at college and progress into degree study. This research will make an essential contribution to evaluating the impact and success of GCU's new College Connect Strategy and will contribute to further enhancing the college and university experience for articulating students.

## **References**

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