

CONTINUING EDUCATION IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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Introduction

To outline the provision of University Continuing Education (UCE) in the UK is a daunting task, not least because of the complexity intrinsic to recent devolution of powers to the nations that compose the country. As a result there exist four separate legislatures (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales) with responsibility for education and lifelong learning and different bodies responsible for the distribution of funding to support UCE in the four regions¹.

The UK of course has a longstanding tradition of university education, and within that system of UCE. The relationship between changes in UCE provision cannot be divorced from the ways in which the university system as a whole has radically altered in recent decades as it has expanded from an elite to a universal system during two eras of expansion in the 1960s and from the mid 1980s to mid 1990s. In the 1960s, as Scott (1997) has suggested, the Robbins Report (Committee of Higher Education 1963) did much more than establish new universities: ‘from Robbins’ “invention” of higher education as a national system flowed all the reforms of the next 30 years’ (Scott 1997, p46). This included the establishment of the polytechnics (which in Scotland were known as Central Institutions (CIs)) as a parallel technical and vocational area of Higher Education. It is this sector within the then binary system of HE that took the lead in what is now the most dominant feature of the UK UCE: the broadening of participation.

For economic reasons, perceived future demographic changes and concerns about social justice, which in the UK have been delineated in detail by Gallacher et al., 1996, Higher Education (HE) expanded considerably from the mid 1980s to mid 1990s with even greater increases in adult participation. In the early 1990s the Government saw the existence of two types of higher education institutions (universities and polytechnics) as an obstacle to their policy to increase participation (DES 1991). For this and other reasons with a strong economic basis, major reforms in 1992 led to the conversion of most polytechnics (and CIs in Scotland) into universities. Later in the decade, following the Dearing (HMSO 1997) and Garrick (SO 1997) Reports of 1997, subsequent policy documents have put considerable emphasis on widening access to HE for individuals from groups who have traditionally not participated (DfEE 1998, Scottish Office 1998, Scottish Executive 1999 and 2000, Welsh Office 1998). Particular stress has been directed towards the recruitment and retention of individuals from lower socio-economic groups, and that imperative is no longer age specific. A target of 50% participation in HE of the school-leaving cohort by 2010 was set out in the 1998 Green Paper (DfEE 1998) and

¹ In the case of Northern Ireland, the funding arrangements of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) apply to the two universities in the province funded through the Department for Employment and Learning (for Northern Ireland), formerly the Department of Education for Northern Ireland (DENI). A service level agreement exists between DEL and HEFCE with the latter providing a range of services.

has become a major political goal. So it is just as likely that those units within universities charged with widening participation (which may or may not be departments of UCE) will be involved in initiatives to increase awareness of HE amongst school pupils as they might be in developing second chance provision for adults.

In this very brief account of the HE system, it is also important to acknowledge that although universities and a small number of colleges of HE are the dominant providers, there is a significant contribution from Further Education Colleges (FECs) to the overall offering. The FECs provide a significant component of short-cycle HE of one or two years full-time equivalent (fte) duration², which, within the aegis of Credit Accumulation and Transfer Schemes (CATS), may lead onto further HE at university level. Considerable support has been given to supporting FECs' efforts within the HE domain and they are seen as a key component in increasing and widening participation.

The changes in the nature of the provision of UCE within the UK that are described below are intimately linked with these overall systemic changes in the HE system as a whole.

Traditions in Continuing Education

The pre-dominant tradition in university continuing education over the last 100 years has been that of Liberal Adult Education (LAE), which Newman associates with 19th century British ideas of learning for learning's sake, knowledge as something valuable in itself and the pursuit of absolute truths (Newman 1994 pp.37-43). The first university continuing education within this tradition is normally regarded to be that of University Extension at the University of Cambridge in 1873, and was founded upon an impetus of providing university education for working men and according to Kelly (1992, p.219) the demand 'for university help in the higher education of women'.

From the early 20th century in the UK as a whole, but particularly England and Wales, links began to emerge between the universities and the movements concerned with political and social change, such as the Workers Educational Association (WEA), the Independent Labour Party and the Co-operative Party. The expansion of LAE during the inter-war years in England and Wales was in part assisted by grants from the government's Board of Education to universities and certain approved associations, including the WEA, who were termed 'Responsible Bodies (RB)'. It was also during this time that universities began to develop Extra-Mural Departments, which co-ordinated their LAE programmes. However, the first department to be described specifically as a 'Department of Continuing Education', did not emerge until well into the 20th century at the University of Nottingham in the 1930s. Indeed even up until the present day, no common nomenclature is used to describe the structures within which UCE is located.

² The main HE qualifications on offer at FECs are Higher National Certificate (HNC) (one-year fte), Higher National Diploma (2-year fte) and most recently Foundation Degrees. The latter are two year HE qualifications very recently introduced and offered by partnerships of FECs, HEIs and employers and are best described as being akin to US Associate Degrees offered by Community Colleges. In England 1 in 7 students take their HE in FECs. Even so the majority of the work of FECs is at non-advanced level below that of HE provision. In England the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) is responsible for funding and planning education and training for over 16-year-olds in England including the non-advanced provision in FECs.

Collaboration between universities and the WEA, described by Stock (1996, p.11) as the 'Great Tradition' whereby the WEA identified the elements of programmes and recruited students, and the universities provided staff was at its strongest in the 1950's and 1960's, and only began to weaken subsequent to the Russell Report of 1973 (DES 1973) when a change in emphasis in the WEA's work was recommended.

Nonetheless, these programmes of LAE survived and indeed flourished in a large number of the older (pre-1992) universities until the final decade of the last century. They consisted typically of short courses, often evening classes of 20-30 hours in duration, that were open to all who wished to participate and were offered at modest fees and without any mandatory assessment. Courses were located both within universities and in out-reach centres often some distance from the parent institution. In many universities, provision took on a variety of other forms. For example programmes were established that focused on older adults, such as the University of the Third Age and a number of universities offered Summer Schools and Study Tours.

Scotland, however, did not develop a similar extensive UCE provision for adults in the liberal tradition, there being only limited financial support from the Scottish Educational Department and local government by comparison with the rest of the UK. Nonetheless some provision of non-accredited evening classes and summer schools existed for much of the later part of the century in a number of universities. In spite of the relative lack of dedicated UCE for much of the century, as Gallacher and Osborne (1995, p422) reported, there is in Scotland a long-standing tradition of accessibility to HE providing opportunities for entry on the basis of ability rather than social origin. Within the UK some of the highest participation rates in HE amongst young people were, and still are, found in Scotland. For a brief period from 1990, Scottish universities did receive a measure of equivalence in funding for UCE (see Skinner and Osborne 1995, and Osborne 1997 for more detail).

A change of funding responsibility from the Department of Education and Science (DES) to the University Funding Council (UFC) in 1989 was paralleled by a more transparent funding methodology for UCE in the UK as a whole. Provision was extended beyond that of Liberal Adult Education (LAE) to categories that were termed 'credit bearing', 'Access' and 'disadvantaged'. These latter two categories focused in a very explicit fashion on those adult students denied access to the university system for a range of situational and institutional reasons. This change in emphasis in continuing education provision, which included the creation of mechanisms for access to mainstream degree provision, had already been in existence in both the non-university HE sector (polytechnics and higher education colleges in England and Wales and CIs in Scotland) and in the Further Education (FE) sector since the late 1970s. The move to the provision that explicitly focussed on under-represented groups was viewed by some commentators as a long overdue change in direction from the universities, the LAE tradition having moved away from its 'historic values, ... particularly its targeting of the working classes and also its commitment to "social purpose" adult education' (Fieldhouse 1996). In short, although programmes within the extra-mural tradition were open to all, in effect they did little to stimulate new demand for learning from those with little or no previous experience of HE. Nonetheless many perceive that great damage was done through the changes of the 1990s. The introduction for the first time of 'credit-bearing' provision is seen by Gray and Williamson (1995) as the precursor of the very radical changes in funding arrangements that had occurred in the 1990s which produced an almost complete shift in UCE from non-accredited LAE to

mainstreamed accredited continuing education. The effects of this shift have been exacerbated in many regions by reform of local government, and consequent cost-cutting in this sector, which historically had financially supported significant elements of community-based university LAE. The staffing of these programmes using relatively inexpensive part-time sessional tutors has allowed the survival of provision in some universities, but with the application of new EU employment laws that oblige employers to offer comparable conditions to part-time staff poses a threat to future viability.

A second main stream of activity within UCE is that of providing continuing professional development (CPD). Such courses are those that meet the specific vocational needs of employers and their employees. The funding of this area of activity in universities is more recent and has been summarised by Parker and Richardson (1995). It was only from 1981 onwards that higher education institutions began to receive specific funding for the development of vocational courses. By 1987 funding had become more targeted to specific short-term development projects and universities were able to apply to the DES for support from a scheme entitled PICKUP (Professional, Industrial and Commercial Knowledge Updating). When in 1989 the UFC took over the funding responsibility for LAE activity, it also took on vocational funding and substituted PICKUP with the term Continuing Vocational Education³ (CVE). An important distinction in the funding between CVE and the LAE previously described was that the former was only for the *development* of programmes, not for the funding of ongoing provision. This reflected a government ethos that the costs of professional development should be the responsibility of employers and the individuals who benefit from it rather than the State.

The 1990s - a period of transformation

The 1990s have seen significant transformations in the role of UCE in the UK as the system of HE itself has become transformed. Slowey (2000, p101) reports that the system changed in both '*scale and shape*' as during the early part of the decade the binary line between universities and polytechnics was broken down, and subsequently massive expansion of the system occurred with a particularly large increase in adult participation. These changes occurred during a period in which economic arguments set within the anticipated impact of globalisation and the rise of new technology were to the fore. The rhetoric of *lifelong learning*, certainly from the perspective of governments and the European Commission, has largely been sustained by these economic arguments (see EC 1995, DfEE 1998 and Scottish Office 1998). Associated with these arguments has been a drive towards rationalisation of provision, greater accountability and the emergence of strong quality assurance indicators. These factors have led to an increasing blurring of boundaries between certain forms of UCE provision and traditional university study and the marginalisation of some LAE traditions in the university sector as a result.

In the UK as a whole, after many years of stability in provision of CE, the 1990s saw very radical changes with a move to mainstreaming of the funding allocation by government. As a result the

³ HEFCE has defined CVE as activity that contributes to the updating of employment-related skills and knowledge to meet the needs of employees and employers. In Scotland the term Continuing Professional Development has been used and has been defined by SHEFC as that provision which must 'be self-financing; and be developmental; and aim either to meet the needs of employers and their workforces or to improve the employment-related skills and knowledge of the students/delegates' (SHEFC 1995) and which is funded for development on the basis of quantitative volume indicators of previous provision. This includes full-cost postgraduate-level provision.

bulk of the funding previously dedicated to LAE, Access, Disadvantaged and Credit-bearing provision has been included in the overall teaching grant to each university.

A series of Circulars from the newly established Funding Councils for Higher Education outlined their intentions to move provision in this direction (HEFCE 1993, 1994a, HEFCW 1993, SHEFC 1993, 1994b, 1995). Institutions currently in receipt of funding for what was still in the main LAE provision were invited to propose what proportions of that funding they wished to move to the mainstream, so that it would be designated as award-bearing continuing education. Any funding not 'protected' in this fashion was redistributed to development projects in areas termed 'non-award-bearing continuing education' and 'widening participation'.

Widening Participation

In England increasing amounts of funding have recently been directed towards widening participation. A series of circulars produced by HEFCE outline initiatives to improve access and participation⁴. These have included a special funding programme allocated on a regional basis to support the development of widening participation projects and formula-based funding that has provided premiums based on institutional success in attracting particular categories of students. Most recently HEFCE (2001a) has announced a range of funding streams including increased funding to institutions 'in proportion to their success in recruiting students from neighbourhoods with low rates of participation in higher education' (HEFCE 2001a, p3), increased expenditure on Summer Schools for HE and premium funding for mature students. Institutions funded by HEFCE are required to submit 3-year action plans for widening participation and initial statements have already been analysed by the *Action on Access* Team (HEFCE 2001b). A full analysis of widening participation strategies was undertaken by Storan (2001).

Four aspects of current policy are worthy of particular attention. Firstly there has been a particular focus on regionalism and secondly on collaboration between and within sectors. Thus intra-sectoral and cross-sectoral partnership at both a sub-regional and regional level is central to much of current development within the *Partnerships for Progression* funding policy framework being introduced in 2002-03. (HEFCE 2001c), As Thomas (2002, p.32) has remarked these developments can be seen as part of 'a move away from the reliance on the markets towards the creation of alliances between services providers to meet the needs of users more effectively'. In policy terms, a clear shift has occurred in allocation of resources to 'national and regional priorities rather than institutional priorities *per se*' (Layer (2002, p. 92)⁵. Thirdly another shift in policy has seen attention directed to young entrants as against adults with the emergence of the DfEE⁶ initiative, the *Excellence Challenge* (DfEE 1999), the mechanics of which Layer (2002) describes in some detail. And finally, as a result of this policy, attention and rewards have been focused disproportionately on the most elite of HEIs without a historic commitment to widening participation.

⁴ Visit the Action on Access website (<http://www.brad.ac.uk/admin/conted/action/context/context.html>) to view a partial list or search the HEFCE website (<http://www.hefce.ac.uk>) under publications. HEFCE (2000) is the most recent consultation on the subject.

⁵ In this respect, policy within this area in England links well with very recent European Commission statements within the document, *Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality* (EC 2001) and the Education Council statement following the Barcelona European Council in May 2002, which endorsed the importance of the local and regional level in promoting lifelong learning.

⁶ The DfEE is now the DfES (Department for Education and Skills)

In 1996/97 the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) established a four-year Non-Award-Bearing, Non-Vocational Continuing Education (NABNVCE) programme, following a one-year interim initiative in 1995/96. As in England, because 'not all of the provision was suitable or appropriate for inclusion in an award-bearing framework, the Council agreed that the remaining funds not transferred into the mainstream teaching grant should be set aside to support a NABNVCE programme for a four-year period (1996/97 to 1999/2000)' (HEFCW 2000a, p1). The expectation was that the emphasis of the NABNVCE would be on encouraging access to HE and promoting participation by traditionally under-represented groups. Unlike elsewhere in the UK, the emphasis in Wales has been to fund direct provision, rather than development activity and here there seems to be more weight given to the 'strong tradition of extra-mural education often provided by specialist university departments' (HEFCW 2000b, p3). New funding arrangements for 2000/01 (HEFCW 2000c) now also reward institutions by allocating teaching resources for students from 'low participation backgrounds'. This premium is primarily directed to recruitment and post-entry support. Additionally HEFCW has set up a Widening Access Fund based on a 'postcode' formula, which is geared towards the development and delivery of pre-entry programmes.

In Scotland, the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) renamed LAE as Continuing Personal Education (CPE). SHEFC's Development Grant to Promote Wider Access Provision initially took the form both of funding to support general university projects within this field and specific projects related to part-time study (SHEFC 1998). The allocation of resources based on current student enrolment ensured that for the first time all universities were in receipt of at least modest funds to promote access. Because of the substantial proportions already transferred to accredited provision, however, it was still the older historic providers who initially held the majority of funding. As elsewhere in the UK, within recent years more attention has been focussed on the issue of widening participation in Scotland. Funding support for widening participation has been directed to four specific strands of activity: the development of the interface between the providers of non-degree post-school education and the universities (the so-called 'FE-HE interface'); institutional development and co-ordination; regional forums; and selective funding (SHEFC 1999). More recently (SHEFC 2001a) funding initiatives within the widening access arena have become more diverse with emphasis moving further to recruiting part-time students and to specific institutions focussing on the needs of geographically remote students. Further development has led to most HE institutions being rewarded on the basis of having secured 'imaginative and innovative ways of securing private sector investment for widening participation activities' (SHEFC 2001b) and all being awarded funds to disburse as fee waivers to part-time students (SHEFC 2001a). Additionally, formula-based funding has been introduced so that extra funds are given to HE institutions 'who are doing most to retain students from under-represented⁷ groups' (SHEFC 2001a). This premium is additional to a 10% premium for part-time student recruitment that has been in place since 1994-95.

Continuing Professional Development

⁷ Under-represented areas are identified using the Claritas Super Profile postcode referenced database used by all UK Funding Councils to determine performance indicators, and has led to what is termed the 'postcode premium'.

Just as the new Funding Councils have changed the funding methodology for LAE, so too has the funding allocation for vocational provision changed in the 1990s. Prior to the breakdown of the binary line between universities and polytechnics, funding was provided to the older universities by the UFC while the non-university sector received an allocation through the Polytechnic and Colleges Funding Council. In England, for the period 1995-96 to 1998-99, institutions on the basis of the submission of business plans were awarded fixed annual amounts of funding for CVE activities in one of four categories (ranging from £300,000 in Category A to nothing in Category D). This initiative has subsequently been evaluated by HEFCE (1998) and has since been superseded by the *Higher Education Reach-out to Business and the Community Fund* (HEFCE 1999). This fund was 'intended to develop the capability of HEIs to respond to the needs of business, and to contribute to economic growth and competitiveness, by enabling HEIs to put into practice organisational and structural arrangements to achieve their strategic aims in this area' (HEFCE 1999, p 1). Again funds have been allocated on the basis of a bidding process. Some £60 million was allocated in 1999 and another £22 million in 2000 (HEFCE 2000b). In Scotland from 1996-97 onwards SHEFC's (1996a) allocation of development funding for what it terms Continuing Professional Development (CPD) has been calculated by a formula (later modified) based on historic indicators of the volume of CPD provision. Thus all Scottish institutions have been able to obtain funding for new developments based on previous activity. Nonetheless there still appear to have been inconsistencies in the awards (which may be dependent to a degree on the efficiency of individual institution's record-keeping and reporting mechanisms). A recent announcement (SHEFC 2001c) merged the CPD funding with the *Professionalisation of Commercialisation* grant scheme into a *Knowledge Transfer Grant* which again is to be distributed on a formula basis.

Summary of the Nature and Extent of the Provision

In summary, in the UK the university continuing education provision is currently:

Provision known as *Award-Bearing Non-Vocational Continuing Education*, or *Credit Bearing Continuing Personal Education*, which carries credit at level 1 (first year undergraduate) or above in the national credit accumulation and transfer (CAT) framework. This activity is funded in the same way as traditional undergraduate provision and is part of the mainstream grant;

Provision known as *Non-Award-Bearing Non-Vocational Continuing Education*, or *Non-Credit Bearing Continuing Personal Education*, which was historic provision that universities have not chosen to move into the mainstream. This provision exists in a number of institutions but, except in Wales, attracts no funding other than the fees paid by students;

Access provision for adults wishing to re-enter university. The provision itself receives no on-going government funding, although initiatives to promote the development of such activity for both adults and young people attracts formula-based development grants. Widening participation initiatives are a major element of UCE work; and

Provision known as *Continuing Vocational Education*, or *Continuing Professional Development*, which has now been included in larger initiatives that are based either on competitive bidding or on formula funding.

In practice, not all of these categories are used by all the Funding Councils and they are already becoming anachronistic. Funding for credit-bearing non-vocational activity is integrated into the main grant for teaching and this form of provision is only distinguished at the institutional level when funds are distributed to UCE departments or the equivalent.

This raises the question of whether credit-bearing non-vocational provision is any longer distinguishable from other undergraduate courses. Some would argue that the changes have been a means of extending the formal curriculum in part-time higher education. In particular it has introduced a greater diversity of provision that counts as 'legitimate knowledge' and a wider range of teaching and assessment methods than those used by traditional subject departments. Furthermore, it may have introduced more diverse student groups into university credit-bearing activity: individuals who are older and more representative of the communities in which their universities are situated. However, if the credit that these individuals receive is not treated by their universities as being equal to that of traditional qualifications (i.e. if there is no equivalence between CE credit and mainstream credit), CE will almost certainly very quickly become marginalised.

CPD programmes equally tax the powers of analysis of the external observer. Whilst much of the CPD provision is high-cost, short, non-credit courses for employers, it can also include three year part-time Masters level courses. For instance, SHEFC's definition of CPD specifically includes a wide range of CPD programmes provided by HEIs including 'sponsored MSc courses, MBAs, conferences and seminars, updating courses etc' providing that they meet the previously mentioned criteria. Those postgraduate courses that are not wholly self-financing are not CPD. Thus a great range of professional updating which is subsidised by government funds through the mainstream funding method is treated as conventional postgraduate work while some postgraduate provision, for the reasons stated above, is included within the category of CVE/CPD⁸.

Lack of clarity to the external observer is also found in the way in which CE activity is organised. Even where central organising units still exist, there is no uniformity of title for the units where UCE is organised and a variety of names are used. There is, however, consistency in that the organising unit usually exists as a centralised non-faculty entity with a cross-university function. The roles of these units now also vary considerably from one institution to another. There are a number of examples of CE units being responsible not simply for the delivery of courses but also playing other cross university roles such as contributing to strategic matters, facilitating learning support for students, co-ordinating credit accumulation and transfer schemes and managing AP(E)L services.

The 1990s have, not surprisingly, seen a move away from the LAE tradition with the disappearance of any government funding for this work. In order to protect historic funding that had been directed towards this area of work, universities have credit-rated much of the activity. The short-term expedient of introducing 'adult-friendly' assessment regimes has allowed many institutions to run essentially the same activity as before. However, as the Government's Quality

⁸ Within this wide-ranging definition of Continuing Professional Development, there are thus some very large scale post-graduate programmes with very large numbers of international participants (often paying high fees), in some cases facilitated by the use of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs), which in many UK universities are of high technical sophistication.

Assurance Agency (QAA) begins to impact on UCE, it is likely that challenges will be made to the legitimacy of CE credit. Where LAE still exists (without government funding), it is effectively being subsidised by universities and can be viewed at most as part of their 'community service' or 'civic responsibility' role; in other universities it has effectively ceased.

Access programmes can be viewed equally as a subsidised activity but, unlike LAE, they bring a clear benefit to many institutions since their students intend to become undergraduates and they can lead to increased enrolments at a time when the number of undergraduate places in universities is being increased. While widening participation remains such a strong policy imperative, widening access in a variety of forms has an assured future and is likely to continue attracting considerable funding.

The greater policy commitment towards Lifelong Learning since the Dearing (HMSO 1997) and Garrick (SOEID 1997) reports of 1997 and subsequent Green Papers (DfEE 1998, SOEID 1998 and WO 1998) has certainly begun to manifest itself in shifts in practice within universities. Activity within the aegis of widening participation is manifested in all universities through a range of activities. However, these activities are neither the preserve of departments of CE and neither are they solely (or even largely) directed towards adults. Recent research (Murphy et al 2002) shows how the facilitation of this now dominant form of UCE activity is often located in central units with direct senior management control and is as much directed towards providing access for school pupils from disadvantaged educational backgrounds as for adults.

In 1997, I suggested that CVE/CPD in its various guises had an uncertain future (Osborne 1997). The clear messages of the British Government from the early 1990s onwards had been that CVE/CPD is a necessity for companies if they are to compete effectively and for individuals to ensure their continuing employability (SO 1991, DfEE 1995, SOEID 1998). However, successive governments have made it clear that it is for companies and individuals, not government, to pay. This is not a concept that is currently well embedded within either the organisational culture or individual attitudes to learning in the UK despite the ideological changes of the last 20 years. It remains to be seen whether the current reward systems, now embedded in the *Higher Education Reach-out to Business and the Community Fund* and the *Knowledge Transfer Grant*, are sufficient to motivate institutions to focus on UCE, given the much greater rewards that are available to them for mainstream teaching and research.

It is difficult to gauge the extent of UCE in the UK. Statistics available from the Higher Education Statistical Agency provide data on all students undertaking full-time and part-time credit bearing HE, and these can be delineated by age at entry (HESA 2002a)⁹. Data for entry to first year in 2000/01 gives a snapshot of mature numbers in the UK (Table 1). Credit-bearing UCE is incorporated in 'part-time undergraduate (other HE)' numbers. Students in this category also include those taking Higher National Certificates and Diploma equivalent in credit terms to one and two years respectively of a degree, but also encompass those taking small amounts of credit as UCE. It is clear and unsurprising that the overwhelming proportion of part-time undergraduate level entrants are aged 21 and over on entry, and in UK terms are therefore

⁹ Some information is publicly available on the HESA website (<http://www.hesa.ac.uk>) but much significant information is only contained in hard-copy publications (e.g. HESA 2002) and CD-ROMs, such as *Planning Plus* (within which NCB HE data is found).

‘mature’. Taking a higher age as a cut-off point, 60.7% of part-time first degree entrants and 69.4 % of part-time ‘other undergraduate’ entrants are aged 30 and over. Details of postgraduate numbers are also readily available and of course over 99% are mature students.

Table 1 First Year UK domiciled undergraduate entrants to HEIs in the UK by age and level of study

Level/Mode	Over 21 and over at entry	All Students ¹⁰	% 21 and over
Full time Undergraduate (1st degree)	60000	287325	20.9
Full time Undergraduate (other HE)	25900	51510	50.3
Part time Undergraduate (1st degree)	30885	32780	94.2
Part time Undergraduate (other HE)	212570	223545	95.1

Source: HESA (2002a)

However, it is much less easy to determine the present extent of non-credit bearing (NCB) UCE provision in the UK since a range of activity is aggregated in the data produced, which itself is difficult to access in public sources. HESA does collect information on NCB courses¹¹ in HE as a whole. Table 2 shows aggregated data for the last three years, and reveals little in terms of trends.

Table 2: Non-Credit Bearing HE in the UK (Student Numbers and Contact Hours)

Year	Student Numbers	Student Contact Hours
1998/1999	752699	18200000
1999/2000	714584	18405936
2000/2001	772837	17445040

Source: HESA (2000, 2001 and 2002b)

Data recently produced by the Scottish Executive (2002) based on the raw HESA statistics from which the data above was also derived, shows that during the period 1995-96 to 2000-01, numbers on NCB courses in all Scottish HEIs reduced from 209,380 to 143,290.

¹⁰ The figures in each column include only UK domiciled students and those whose age is unknown, usually a very small and non-significant number

¹¹ This is a slightly different definition than that which was used in the past. NCB is defined as courses that do not lead to a qualification or institutional credit, or those students who are studying on credit-bearing programmes of study but on a not-for-credit basis.

Institutional Structures

It is obvious that across the UK that a large panoply of HE activity could be regarded as in some way as UCE, though the extent to which this is identifiable in particular structural units is variable. All of the models that have been presented by writers such as Berrell and Smith (1997) and Mitchell (2000) are identifiable in one institution or another and in some cases there is a mixed economy of management practices.

At some institutions, particularly with respect to the dominant mission of increasing and widening participation, responsibility for steering policy and practice has been placed within the aegis of central university management, often as part of the responsibility of a Pro-Vice-Chancellor. In some cases that person also manages UCE and that activity in all its manifestations assumes greater significance, and in others UCE has been marginalised.

In other institutions it is possible to identify a range of other structural units with specific responsibilities. Largely these units are concerned with ways in which individuals can more easily surmount the structural barriers created by institutions and more flexibly construct qualifications, and in that sense are one aspect of widening participation (Osborne 2003). They derive from a range of related concerns that it is the structural form of HE that presents some of the most formidable barriers to learners, and that greater flexibility in terms of the location and timing of learning opportunities, and of the ways learning is recognised, accredited, accumulated and transferred should be available.

The Robertson Report (HEQC 1994) advocated the creation of a national credit framework across the UK to facilitate flexible student mobility and to increase student motivation, and this concept gained great momentum as a key proposal of the well-known Dearing Report (HMSO 1997). The notion of such a framework is that there should be a common cross-institutional set of levels of post-school education within which credit can be obtained. Such frameworks are at various stages of development in the nations of the UK and are linked to the notion of accumulating and transferring credit towards qualifications. Together national credit frameworks and Credit Accumulation and Transfer Systems (CATS) are seen to be key structural vehicles for ensuring that credit-bearing learning can be 'banked', and built towards qualifications in a flexible fashion. CATS are intimately linked to the practice of Accreditation of Prior (Experiential) Learning (AP(E)L) and its close 'relative', Accreditation of Work-based Learning (AWBL). The historical development of AP(E)L and its move from the margin to the mainstream is described by Storan (2000, p14). He notes that the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) stated that 'Appropriate learning at higher education level, wherever it occurs, provided that it can be assessed, can be given credit towards and academic award' (CNAA 1986). However, despite the longstanding advocacy of the approach and the considerable commitment of the DfEE to funding projects in work-based learning, approaches such as AP(E)L and AWBL have only made inroads in a limited number of institutions and are viewed with considerable suspicion by many universities.

The further structural features of semester systems replacing the traditional three-term structure and modularization have offered additional elements of flexibility in many institutions. Many UK institutions now offer a two-semester system traditional to the US, and furthermore some have introduced a third period in the summer, and effectively run a trimester system. Increasingly

undergraduate and postgraduate programmes are offered in modular fashion and allow students to build qualifications from a range of elements over periods that suit them rather than the institution. However, as I write a backlash against semesterisation is emerging (THES 2002). The emerging arguments against the half-year as against the year as a discrete teaching block have been led by a view that not sufficient time is made available for the gestation of knowledge. The proposition that credit-based modular course structures necessarily produces greater learning choice and flexibility is also being challenged by empirical evidence that the extent of credit transfer between HEIs is much smaller than predicted. Even so it seems rather ironic that as the European Union through the Bologna agreement is seeking these very forms of solution, that the European country with the most advanced form of credit transfer system is questioning its practice in this domain..

Thus currently within a number of institutions, structural units responsible for facilitating these elements of flexibility can be found. Examples include centres with responsibility for AWBL, AP(E)L, CATS and part-time and summer degree provision.

Furthermore a range of universities have dedicated Distance Learning units using new ICTs (Information and Communications Technologies), that can capitalise on the very strong technology infrastructure of UK HE, and the advantages internationally of being able to deliver in the English medium. In this context, it should also be noted that the UK hosts the one of the world's most significant mass distance education universities, The Open University, which using the EUCEN definition of UCE is exclusively that. A further development of potential significance is the University of Highland and Islands Millennium Project, a university project based around a consortium of FE colleges and research institutes. It has received considerable government background to deliver HE to geographically remote areas of Scotland using ICTs. The use of ICT as a means of securing a greater market of CPD for the UK, largely in the form of high-cost Masters level provision, is intrinsic to the current development of the UK's e-university¹² and in Scotland the creation of the *Interactive University* at Heriot-Watt University. It is of interest in these developments that consortia of universities are making links with particular broadcasting and media groups, although there are signs that these links are fragile. So for instance, the e-university has discussed with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) how they might play a role in conducting pilot programmes and in developing materials (HEFCE 2001d). However, the international media corporation, News International, which had a 10% stake *Scottish Knowledge* (a consortium of all Scottish Universities that aims to market the sector's expertise to a world audience and now absorbed within the Interactive University) has withdrawn from the arrangement.

Networks

There are very strong networks of expertise that link together the concerns of the HEIs in the field of UCE in the UK. The two most prominent of these are the Universities Association for Continuing education (UACE) and the Forum for the Advancement of Continuing Education (FACE). UACE is exclusively an organisation representing the interests of HE, whilst FACE

¹² The *e-University* developed as a working title for the collaboration is now formally entitled *UK eUniversities Worldwide*. HEFCE (2002) states that 'the project is designed to give UK higher education the capacity to compete globally with the major virtual and corporate universities being developed in the United States and elsewhere'.

with predominantly a HE membership from post-1992 universities also includes other sectors, particularly FECs, in its membership. UACE contains within it a number of networks in particular subsidiary areas (e.g. in areas such as Educational Equality and Widening Participation and Work-based learning) and sub-committees (e.g. in Research). Both organisations run regular seminars and conferences, and publish a variety of reports in the UCE area, and this is reflected in the rich literature in the field in the UK. In addition to UACE and FACE, a very significant body with a remit beyond simply universities in the realm of adult education is the publisher of this book, the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE).

Research

The existence of a sub-committee for research within UACE signals the importance of this aspect of UCE work. Research in all disciplines dominates HE within the UK where there is a Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) every four or five years in which each discipline area in each institution is awarded significant amounts of funding following the award of a grade within a seven-point scale. Continuing Education research has in recent RAE exercises been assessed by a sub-panel of academic and users of outputs that has advised the main Education panel, and has been the only sub-area of Education to be treated in this fashion. The last exercise was in 2001 and is still the subject of analysis and review. It is clear that a major criterion for the assessment of departments was the quality of the output of academic staff within traditional academic domains: academic journal articles and research-based books. It is therefore no surprise that an increasing amount of UCE output is emerging in the academic literature from the UK, and that a number of dedicated research centres in aspects of Lifelong Learning have been established in recent years. Even so there is a widespread belief that research in UCE is relatively under-developed with respect to that within other areas of Education, and that it is under-theorised, lacking in longitudinal studies and not based on the systematic accumulation of related study. However, it should be said that this assertion perhaps also applies to other areas of educational research.

Conclusions

In the UK, the concept of UCE has historically been well defined by state or quasi-state agencies, and it has been an activity located within well defined structural units in most institutions. At present there is a great diversity of institutional structure for the co-ordination of UCE and a wide-ranging role, not simply as the organisers of courses but also in facilitating a range of activities and contributing to strategic planning at the institutional level. However, it is clear that the changes of funding in the 1990s and the strong national Lifelong Learning agenda have had significant effects on both the structure and provision of UCE in many institutions.

Gray and Williamson (1995) summarised the potential issues of the funding changes of the 1990s. They suggested that if mainstreaming of LAE was a success it would be a reflection of a general tendency within the higher education system of moving from a largely young and full-time constituency towards an adult and part-time clientele. However, they suggested that there may be a danger that those adults who had previously taken LAE programmes would not wish to undertake courses that carry higher education credit. No data exists to quantify the extent of participation in CE credit-bearing provision since it is aggregated with other categories of part-

time provision. However, there is little doubt that the decline of many UCE departments is associated with the lack of demand for credit by the populations that historically took LAE. The possibility of more stringent criteria for 'completion' from HEFCE that will regard those who do not complete work for assessment as ineligible in calculations for future funding creates a further stressor since significant proportions of individuals do not take assessments. This pressure for accountability within increasingly robust external quality mechanisms has already led to the absorption of funding allocated to UCE into the mainstream in some institutions and this is likely to continue. In a sense this is part of the blurring of boundaries between part-time, full-time and CE provision, though it is doubtful that those previously served by UCE will be the beneficiaries.

Nonetheless looking beyond this aspect of UCE, there is almost certainly a wider population benefiting from development funding allocated to the field. Government support for UCE is increasingly becoming targeted to widening participation for previously excluded groups: these include younger people as well as adults with policy makers concerned to make early interventions, thereby breaking negative inter-generational cycles. It is likely that younger people will ultimately be the greater beneficiaries of such policies as lifelong learning strategies move into the school arena.

The dismantling of central units in some universities has been part of a managed policy of dispersing of the roles, values and responsibilities of UCE departments across the university. Recent funding for widening participation developments have been used to support centrally the kinds of provision and support for 'non-traditional' learners that formerly would have been the role of centralised units. Concomitantly there are signs in many universities that the historic concerns of UCE departments are becoming increasingly marginalised. Whilst, some of the traditional roles may very well have been unfocussed, the speed with which they have been dismantled may prove to be detrimental to certain groups, and it is clear that there are some notable omissions amongst the beneficiaries of the current UCE offer. Furthermore, the emphasis on one particular aspect of Lifelong Learning, whilst highly creditable, may mean that other potential areas of concern have received little attention. One neglected group and one neglected area stand out: older adults and learning for sustainability.

Even far-sighted reports such as that of the Lifelong Learning Committee of the Scottish Parliament (2002a) with its introduction of the notion of a 'lifelong learning entitlement'¹³ to expand learning through the lifespan, paid little attention to the needs of older adults in its interim findings¹⁴. Participation among older people in HE is in decline, at a time when overall participation among adults is rising, and this in part is happening because of the policy decisions taken in the early 1990s in relation to the accreditation of university continuing education. Very few departments of UCE can now sustain U3A or similar programmes given the lack of government support. Yet there are sound economic as well as social and health-related reasons for promoting learning among senior citizens whose proportions in the overall population of UK (as in other parts of Europe) are increasing. A recent paper by Tom Schuller (2002) makes cogent arguments for greater opportunity to be afforded to those over 55 in all forms of post-compulsory learning. He has proposed a £150 Educational Allowance for the 55+ group, 'catering for

¹³ This concept is in its early stages of gestation, but refers to the notion that every citizen be allocated the equivalent of 5 years full-time study (in credit terms 720 Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) credits) to 'be spent as he or she wished' (Scottish Parliament 2002b, para 31) after the age of 16.

¹⁴ In its final report of 28 October 2002, this omission has been acknowledged (Scottish Parliament 2002b, para 46)

people's intellectual and psychological wellbeing as the Winter Fuel Allowance caters for their material comfort' (ibid. p. 26).

The area that I identify as one of neglect is that of sustainability. One of the world's greatest challenges over the next few decades will be to use its resources in a sustainable way and to equitably distribute them. One of the characteristics of the 'Learning University' is the degree to which it adopts environmental sustainable practices (Duke 2002). Yet, no-where within the various policy papers that have emerged in the UK over the past few years has this aspect of Lifelong Learning received serious attention. The UK's Sustainable Development Commission (2002) points to regeneration being founded on economic, social and environmental benefits, and focuses on the link between environment and poverty. However, it does not mention access to skills of citizenship to engage in such radical rethinking. And it is hard to identify environmental sustainability as a substantive element of the policy of any university or UCE offer.

Despite (and because of) these omissions in the UCE portfolio, there is undoubtedly still the need for a dynamic body that is both *of* the academy, but also critically acting as an agent of change from *without*. Many gains have been made by UCE in the UK, but success can breed obsolescence. Certainly one should always be cautious about the long-term viability of widening participation as a UCE activity. Firstly its success and integration as a core concern may make more and more departments of UCE redundant. Secondly although any venture, even one underwritten with such a strong policy commitment as widening access, may still suffer when it is faced with other competing policy concerns. The demand amongst many universities for the deregulation of tuition fees to finance what is perceived to be an under-funded HE sector presents a particular challenge to access and equity initiatives. Nonetheless at present it seems unlikely that widening participation will not remain high on the UK government's agenda. Similarly with the increased concern with knowledge transfer and the commercialisation of university outputs, it is likely, despite my earlier cautions, that CPD activities in their various forms will gain ground. In that arena, the opportunities afforded by new technology are considerable, though as yet developments have largely been piecemeal, and in most cases not of a scale to be viable commercially. The e-university development may provide be a major step in development, though undoubtedly only for the few major players in the consortium. Other universities will however find local consortia-based solutions, some with other European partners and some with collaborators further afield.

In conclusion, UCE has changed considerably over the last decade and has moved in many institutions to be one of their core concerns. The prospects that it will, in various guises, endure for some considerable time yet are good. However, to survive in the long term, UCE will need to continually innovate and find new challenges. There are very strong networks of expertise that link together the concerns of the HEIs in the field of UCE in the UK, and to a large degree the extent to which they can steer a path for the sector as a whole is likely to be crucial.

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Useful Websites (not otherwise included in the text)

Associations and non – governmental organisations

UACE - <http://www.uace.org.uk>

FACE - <http://www.f-a-c-e.org.uk>

NIACE – <http://www.niace.org.uk>

Universities UK - <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk>

Government and Quasi-government Agencies

Learning and Skills Council – <http://www.lsc.gov.uk>

SHEFC – <http://www.shefc.ac.uk>

HEFCW - <http://www.wfc.ac.uk/hefcw/index.html>

DfES – <http://www.dfes.gov.uk>

Scottish Executive – <http://www.scotland.gov.uk>

DENI – <http://www.deni.gov.uk>

Other

List of UK Continuing Education Home Pages.

http://www.ex.ac.uk/~PRFChani/ACE/UK_CE_Depts.html

Scottish Knowledge - <http://www.scottishknowledge.com/home.cfm>

UK eUniversities Worldwide - <http://www.ukeuniversitiesworldwide.com/>