

FINAL REPORT

Flexible PG pathways: developing an interdisciplinary Masters in Lifelong Learning by credit accrual programme to widen participation in taught postgraduate

Bid: Collaborative student researchers – two current CLL undergraduate students will be appointed to undertake development research to group interview two prospective audiences for the new programme (local community adults and ‘non-traditional’ Warwick undergraduates) and to co-produce a policy-informing report.

The context for this project was to employ a pair of student researchers to assist with market research in the development of an innovative, flexible and accessible Masters level programme, which would be designed to meet the needs and interests of adult learners in the local community. Its aim was to dovetail with the future objectives of the University in terms of wider participation, greater inclusivity, and opportunities for adult learners and further links with the local community.

Early market research conducted by the Centre for Lifelong Learning indicated that a real demand in the local community, and especially amongst adult learners in low participation neighbourhoods, for flexible and accessible postgraduate provision. Moreover, undergraduate students from ‘widening participation’ courses like the 2+2 and part-time degree programmes have limited opportunities to continue studies at postgraduate level.

The project sought to be the next stage in a three step process of bringing postgraduate study to a wider community. The first part was the Gateway to PG, a free (University funded) 10-week course for students who might not have completed an undergraduate degree, but demonstrated potential to study at Master’s level. Now onto its third iteration, the Gateway to PG offers students an interdisciplinary learning experience that draws from their own experiences to explore a number of substantive issues through a range of disciplinary lenses.

This project then looked to encompass the second and third parts of the process – a suite of 10-week, 20 CATS PGT courses, which could be blocked together to form an MA in Social Studies/Lifelong Learning. This programme would continuously evolve and grow – based on student feedback, the involvement of other University departments and the popularity of different subject areas – so that as students progressed through the MA, they would have a wider choice of options to build up their study. It would be both multi- and inter-disciplinary, with core modules in research methods and a dissertation. We envisioned the addition of this new postgraduate provision would considerably improve recruitment and retention figures for the Centre for Lifelong Learning, as well as contributing significantly to the University’s increasing mature student targets.

Because of the unique nature of the proposed model, there was a considerable amount of development work required. As part of the project methodology, two existing CLL students were engaged as researchers, undertaking developmental research to inform the new programme about the needs and interests of its target audience. These students, Alan Barrett-Evans and Nicolie Murphy, are both existing undergraduates within the Centre for Lifelong Learning. They have outlined their work below:

“This research project concerned the development of a new modular MA programme by the Centre for Lifelong Learning (CLL). There were three main elements to the work we carried out: a) creation and analysis of an online survey; b) an extensive online search of Master’s degree provision both in the UK and abroad; and c) attendance at two events with the Centre for Lifelong Learning’s Community Engagement Officer, Mark Hinton.

The construction of the online survey was an interesting and relatively straightforward exercise. Use of the free service provided by Survey Monkey meant that the number of questions was limited to just ten so these had to be very carefully chosen. This was done in conjunction with CLL staff, and the question types included single and multiple selections from a list, yes/no answers, and a likert question. The survey was sent out to all recent alumni from CLL (from the Certificate programme and the undergraduate degrees) and 65 responses were received.

The results showed a wide range of motivations for study and a wide range of interests in possible subjects for study. Two consistent themes were that the flexibility of the Master’s degree was a significant attraction, and that cost was a major concern (see Appendix A).

The next element of the research project was a wide-ranging search of comparative provision. This took a considerable amount of time as many university websites are surprisingly difficult to navigate. The comprehensive search revealed that the proposed course to be offered by CLL was, as far as can be determined, unique. Although there is some offering of modular degrees at undergraduate level they do not appear to be available at postgraduate level. Another key discovery was that the proposed level of fees to be charged by CLL was competitive when compared to other Master’s provision (see Appendix B).

The final element of the research project was to attend two separate events answering questions about the proposed Master’s offering. There was a number of enquiries from prospective students covering a wide range of topics. These included the extent to which further modules than those already planned would be offered and questions about costs and finance.

There are a number of positive outcomes from this research project. Firstly, as researchers, we gained invaluable practical experience of working on a real project. This experience included receiving a brief, designing research questions, and collating and analysing results. Results from the three separate elements of the research have been incorporated into the course offering and this has given us great personal satisfaction. There were no

specific problems that were encountered, partly due to the clear brief that was given, although it was interesting to note that such an apparently straightforward task as searching for competitor provision was much more time-consuming than expected.”

Following the student researcher work, and a number of discussions with Teaching Quality, a proposal was put together for the MA in Social Studies. Despite approval at Faculty level, the University retains a number of concerns about the programme. These centre around the degree's perceived lack of a single disciplinary focus, so there is further work to do for the course to obtain full University backing. We believe, however, from the work undertaken so far that there is a market for a more flexible M-level provision and we will continue to work to formulate something that will work for both the University and the local community.