

Findings of, and reflections on, the Gender, Lifelong Learning and Social Class (GLAS) project. A UK partnership based perspective.

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Abstract: This paper describes the main findings of GLAS, a two-year, EC co-funded project to address potential barriers to lifelong learning. In considering the genesis of the project, its structure and partnership, we will discuss findings from the perspective of UK partners, Linking London. We will show that tackling complex issues of social inclusion requires the creative use of processes and strategies which already exist within higher education, and conclude by making recommendations for future research and action.

Keywords: Gender, social class, lifelong learning, inclusion

Resumen: Este artículo describe los principales resultados del proyecto GLAS, un proyecto bianual, financiado por la UE, que analiza las principales barreras en el aprendizaje a lo largo de la vida. Tras exponer la génesis del proyecto, su estructura y sus colaboradores, el artículo presenta los resultados desde la perspectiva de Linking London, socio en el Reino Unido. Defiende que para tratar el complejo tema de la inclusión social se requiere el uso creativo de procesos y estrategias que ya existen en la educación superior, y concluye con recomendaciones para futuras investigaciones y líneas de actuación.

Palabras clave: Género, clase social, aprendizaje a lo largo de la vida, inclusión.

1. Introduction to the Gender, Lifelong Learning and Social Class (GLAS) project

The GLAS project came about through the recognition from partner countries in the European Union that despite increased opportunities to pursue education over the last few decades, barriers still remain which prevent some individuals from accessing education or learning opportunities. These barriers are often not due to a lack of ability or desire to learn but to the gender and the social background from which the person who wishes to seek the education originates. The barriers can be societal or cultural, and can be further strengthened, unconsciously, by the practices and processes present in the education systems themselves. The consequences of this for European society are the reinforcement of social injustice, a contributing factor to perpetuating the present downward trend of social mobility and the reduction in social cohesion. From an economic standpoint, Europe itself loses out in global competition in education, research and innovation, and its people fail to keep pace with the demand for higher skills in the work place.

The current economic climate compounds the issue, yet by simply naming it the GLAS project has brought it into the consciousness of the staff and policy makers of higher education institutions (HEIs). This has sparked discussion and a realisation that an individual's gender and social class can and still does remain a barrier to accessing learning opportunities despite widespread massification of higher education in partner countries. Furthermore, partners in the GLAS project have started to benefit staff working in HEIs in both academic and administrative roles by creatively using existing processes and strategies to widen access and diversify HEI student populations with talented individuals who reflect the communities in which the HEI is located, by using inclusive educational approaches, suggesting changes to policy and supporting staff.

2. Project structure

The GLAS project achieved its aims by looking closely at six core themes which, so the consortium believed, could have the potential if used creatively to help achieve social inclusion in HE in situations where gender and class could be barriers. These core themes were:

1. The accreditation of prior (or experiential) learning
2. Work based learning
3. Social mobility

4. Widening participation
5. Civic and community engagement
6. Continuous professional development

For two years (2011-2013) the GLAS partners produced concise and easy-to-read reports for each of the six core themes. These include an introduction to the core theme itself from each partner country's perspective, and an explanation of how existing processes and strategies can be used to achieve social inclusion, in particular whilst addressing issues of class and gender. In addition to accessible reports, GLAS, where possible, provided staff with practical suggestions on how to address these issues in the form of staff development resource packs and case studies of situations where schemes to address the potential barriers of gender and class have worked well. The fourth output from each core theme was a policy recommendation paper for government, education policy makers, senior staff within education and others, to improve the access situation in relation to class and gender for the future.

3. Partnership

The people who researched, wrote and collated these resources and managed the GLAS project are potential users. GLAS partners included HEI academic staff, administrative staff and practitioners working within a non-governmental organisation (NGO). In addition, the UK partner and coordinating institution, Linking London brought the project a slightly different perspective as a consequence of the collective experience of several years' work with its varied membership. The implications of this independence from one institutional perspective resulting in objectivity, for the project's success, will be discussed next.

A unique type of partnership perspective from the UK

Linking London is currently a partnership of twenty eight organisations, comprised of ten universities, ten further education and adult education colleges, a sixth form college, a school, a union learning organisation, two awarding bodies, a professional body, an organisation to support the innovative use of information technology in teaching and research, and a London council office with responsibility for the education and skills of young people in the capital. Currently in its eighth year of operation, it is now a subscription funded network. Linking London began in 2006 as a Lifelong Learning Network (LLN), one of several initiatives of this kind (designed to improve the access to HE for students

from lower socio-economic groups with vocational backgrounds and from those in work or currently under-represented in HEIs) set up over a number of years by the last Labour government (1997–2010) and supported by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Financed through a HEFCE funding stream designed to stimulate innovative working, LLNs were tasked to achieve change, and to bring a ‘clarity, coherence and certainty of progression’ to vocational learners. This is significant for GLAS as in the UK most vocational learners tend to come from more disadvantaged and socially deprived sections of our communities, or have found the traditional model of academic learning uninspiring (Betts and Burrell, 2011). Therefore, it was a natural development for the Linking London partnership network to seek a collaborative project in which to explore what it saw as “unfinished, yet vital business”.

The nature and constitution of Linking London, as a network independent of any one specific educational establishment or government department, has been able to bring a collaborative approach which has not been bounded by the dictates of “institutional professionalism”. This has facilitated a refreshing and objective look at the issues faced by HEIs, and it is from this starting point that Linking London has led and directed GLAS. It is interesting to note that LLNs or similar FE/HE partnership organisations are not found in any of the partner countries.

4. Main findings

4.1 Reflections from the UK

It became clear early on in the project that each partner country in the GLAS consortium is facing similar issues but to different extents with respect to the impact of the financial crisis. Other obvious similarities across partner countries include a collective move towards the individual bearing the cost of higher education and therefore towards society not being responsible for the cost of an individual’s education beyond the statutory level, subtle political movement towards right wing policies especially around immigration of labour (and students), funding cuts leading to job losses and course attrition, and a greater emphasis on monitoring and evaluative practices to make the most of what little there is and to justify future expenditure.

During the course of the GLAS project, however, it should be clearly stated that the UK has been experiencing the most significant changes to HE for over half a century, with the implementation of the “Browne Review” (Lord Browne

of Madingley, 2010), the tripling of tuition fees, competitive bidding for student places and the move towards opening the sector more widely to private profit making institutions.

It was interesting to note that colleagues from other partner countries could not imagine such significant changes to their Higher Education systems in the absence of the equivalent of full parliamentary scrutiny which comes with new legislation. In fact, as the project progressed a number of differences in the fundamental workings and ethos of universities in the UK, compared with those in partner countries became apparent. These will be addressed when they arise in the sub-headed sections below and summarised in the conclusions. Findings from the core themes which we have classified as processes – the accreditation of prior (experiential) learning (AP(E)L), work based learning (WBL) and continuous professional development (CPD) – will be discussed first, followed by the strategies of social mobility by widening participation, and community and civic engagement.

4.2 Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning (AP(E)L)

Despite differences in the management and delivery of AP(E)L processes across the partnership, all countries demonstrate similarities in the philosophy (that is, seeing AP(E)L as a learning innovation) and the intended purpose of an AP(E)L process for (mainly vocational) learners. The UK AP(E)L system, which was first developed in the 1990s as ‘advanced standing’, predates both the systems found in the Netherlands and Spain. In both continental countries, however, the development has been driven forward by political commitment to the process as a way of up-skilling and empowering individuals. As a consequence there exists in the Netherlands and Spain a type of central regulation and control that is absent in the UK system. In fact, in the Netherlands, nationally quality assured structures are in place around the use of AP(E)L, and both countries have a central funding allocation.

A key difference, between the UK, Spain and the Netherlands, however, is the age groups of the students involved. In the Netherlands and Spain approximately ninety per cent of AP(E)L takes place at pre-HE levels, unlike the UK where AP(E)L is exclusively offered at HE level. Spain is in the process of developing an AP(E)L system for HE and so the process is currently used only at the discretion of individual universities. Interestingly despite this difference in age groups, similar curriculum areas make the most use of the process (see Table 1) and a similar methodology using learner portfolios exists in all countries.

Table 1: Main curriculum areas in which APEL is practised

<i>UK (mainly HE level)</i>	<i>The Netherlands (mainly pre-HE level)</i>	<i>Spain (mainly pre- HE level)</i>
Health, Social Care, Business, Management, Engineering, Built Environment and Education. Evidence of practice in other vocational areas and subjects like Music.	Technology (40%), Business Services (17%), Carpentry and Wood Sector (17%), Health and Welfare (13%), Trade and Transport and Logistics (3%)	Social Care, Children's Education, Automotion, Health, Water, and Catering

Source: authors

The UK AP(E)L system is characterised by the lack of a standard operating model or approach as variability of models of AP(E)L management and delivery are evident between, and indeed within, HEIs in the UK; instead the development of systems has been organic and at the discretion of individual HEIs. In addition, there is no requirement for the training of AP(E)L practitioners in the UK. The Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL) is dealt with as an administrative task whilst AP(E)L is normally managed as a taught or tutor-supported learning activity, often in a module that may or may not be credit bearing.

This is in contrast to the Netherlands, where government policy encourages the use of AP(E)L and training, which is effectively a 'license to practice' similar to that of teacher training, has evolved and is a requirement in order to work in this area. Spain also has clear requirements to be fulfilled in order for assessors and evaluators to practice 'These can be at least four years' experience as a qualified teacher or an equivalent competency, along with additional knowledge and training requirements. The Spanish approach is much more formal and is backed by legislation, which probably reflects its more recent genesis within the national education system.

A common thread in all countries was "scepticism of equivalence", which translated into concerns about 'quality' in AP(E)L processes. This is to say, despite the system being based on the fact that the learning was equivalent, it was not seen as being of a comparable quality to that achieved through traditional methods. As a consequence of this criticism, the issue of quality has been brought to the forefront of AP(E)L use and practice. In the Netherlands there is a code (supported by a covenant) and in Spain legislative standards control the quality. In the UK the result was often over-bureaucracy, portfolios becoming overly full and not reflecting an equivalent to a traditional learning process. However,

the publication of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2004) guidelines has led to a more recent approach that is consistent and transparent.

The funding of AP(E)L, as with other aspects of education, has probably determined its successes or otherwise in the UK. In the Netherlands, AP(E)L is a national government funded initiative which offers tax incentives for individual learners and their employers who use AP(E)L. This clearly 'locates' the role of AP(E)L as something for use in or associated with work-based learning (WBL). Similarly, in Spain AP(E)L is also state funded, with users paying only a small administration fee. By contrast, in the UK funding for AP(E)L is only available if it is part of a delivered module and as a consequence the costs for the process are passed on to the students. A wide variation in cost does little to help promote the system's profile or transparency amongst students and other stakeholders. In fact a coherent national message is absent in the UK, and this is probably the result of the organic evolution of the system in a variety of HEIs.

Therefore AP(E)L is promoted by different HEIs and further education colleges (FECs) to differing extents but there is no national effort for this or evidence of targeting AP(E)L to specific groups. AP(E)L opportunities are commonly found several clicks away from the front page on HEI and FEC websites, if they have a web presence at all. However, it is of interest to note that Newcastle College in the North of England has recently launched an exciting 'Recognise me' service (Newcastle College Group, 2012) with an attractive and straightforward website as a way of engaging students with AP(E)L online. Renaming the process with a catchy and more self-explanatory title may prove to be a way of making AP(E)L more accessible. In the Netherlands, universities, employers, trade unions and a specific Dutch Knowledge Centre for AP(E)L have a national role in disseminating knowledge and information about the process. In Spain, as AP(E)L use is mainly pre-HE it is part of the national vocational offer and through targeted initiatives is promoted by local authorities and trade unions. However, interestingly, such is the demand that education providers themselves do not promote it.

One outcome of the GLAS project partners' investigation into AP(E)L was a consensus that, when used appropriately, AP(E)L could be a powerful process that helps to involve learners who might face specific barriers to engaging or re-engaging with learning at any point in their life time. The project partners concluded that the HE funding reforms, currently happening in England, offer an opportunity to "rethink" the way AP(E)L is funded, developed and monitored. This could ensure that it becomes embedded in the education offer and a national process for enhancing access to HE for all. Linked with AP(E)L is work-based learning (WBL), the key findings relating to which will be summarised next.

4.3 Work-based learning (WBL)

For the purposes of this collaborative work, GLAS partners identified three main types of WBL: learning that is about or related to work, learning that takes place at or in work, and learning that is achieved through work. Importantly all partners identified WBL as having an established role in lifelong learning and, poignantly, a valuable role to play in supporting personal, corporate and social regeneration in the current economic crisis in Europe. In a similar way to APEL there was variability within the partnership of the age groups and therefore sectors typically engaged in WBL activities.

In Spain much of the vocational education offer happens at pre-HE levels in the form of apprenticeship type schemes accessed usually by 16-18 year olds to achieve the title 'Technician' or as an 18 year old to become an 'Advanced Technician' (the latter provides a direct route into related HE studies). However, in Spain there is very little activity in the area of in-company accreditation though it is recognised that this is an area of WBL that requires further exploration by HE. There is, therefore, greater central control within the system in Spain, and indeed in the Netherlands, at pre-HE levels compared with HE based systems in the UK. A recent WBL innovation in Spain is the presence of compulsory internships for most undergraduate degrees, determined by the Royal Decree (Ministerio de la Presidencia, 2011). This requires students to gain in-depth knowledge of a business organisation so that they can combine their theoretical knowledge with practical skills and have experience of the professional world prior to graduation. Students on internships are protected by a cooperative educational agreement which regulates the relationship between the student, the company and the university. In addition the university closely monitors the arrangements, and a final activity report is produced.

In the binary system that exists in the Netherlands it is the Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS) that focus on vocational qualifications, training and professional research. UASs offer an extensive range of vocationally related courses from Associate Degrees (AD, similar to the UK Foundation Degree) to undergraduate and Master's level qualifications. These cover many sector areas including Economics, Management, Law, Education, Society, Arts, Languages, Communication, Healthcare, ICT, Engineering, Construction and Life Sciences. Full-time, part-time or dual modes of delivery are available although, as in the UK, in the Netherlands it is young learners who tend to use the full-time study option. Business apprenticeships are also offered in the Netherlands within organisations or in fully working training companies within provider institutions

(e.g. the Hotelschool Maastricht at Zuyd University of Applied Science which provides a unique learning environment in the form of a teaching hotel and restaurant).

As with other learning innovations such as APEL, WBL has not been generically promoted on a regional and national level in partner countries, with the possible exception of some specifically targeted literature from the Netherlands. The consensus was that any WBL offer that does exist would be, in general, difficult to locate by the target groups with which GLAS is concerned, unless they had prior knowledge or experience of the process. However, as a process WBL offers the chance to empower and engage with learners who might not normally have considered formal learning. In addition, a belief was shared by all partners that WBL can act as a way of incorporating personal, professional and employment development and therefore lifelong learning across a learner's life. By flexible delivery it offers an alternative educational experience to learners who may have been disaffected by formal educational systems and could help re-engage and retain learners who have dropped out or are at risk of doing so. It is therefore an important and unrecognised process for widening participation. What is more, by using APEL, WBL can help learners who lack formal education and learning by acknowledging and accrediting the learning, skills and competencies acquired for, at and through the workplace. This is of particular economic importance considering that an ageing population means that 70% of the workforce required for the year 2020 has already completed compulsory education.

4.4 Continuous professional development (CPD)

Across all countries the GLAS project found that the majority of CPD processes within HEIs are individually staff focussed, covering support around leadership and management, and other generic skills. A significant exception to this rule was the example of a recent small pilot programme offering support for teachers of lifelong learning in Zuyd in the Netherlands, which is explained in more detail in the CPD report (GLAS, 2013). We also found CPD to be largely inwardly focussed by being directly linked to learning or skill needs identified during the institutional Professional Development Review (PDR) or equivalent process.

Despite the focus of work-related skills there also exist Study Assistance Programmes or schemes in many partner country HEIs, which enable staff to follow intellectual interests which may be directly outside of skills required and used for work. In addition, some HEIs offers courses in academic development

through their own internal centres with names such as “Centre for Learning and Professional Development” (CLPD).

What is immediately clear, and is seen as a missed opportunity by the GLAS partners, is the lack of CPD support to help staff to understand the learning needs of non-traditional learners (which are not covered in the Equality Act 2010) both prior to and after recruitment. The implication perhaps is that the needs, issues and barriers for this target group, perhaps first-generation learners or mature learners, are no different to those of traditional learners. However, being cognizant of the varying needs and contexts of different cohorts of potential students, or to coin government rhetoric “customers”, must surely be an area of increasing interest to HEIs in most EU countries, not least because the issue for many HEIs in the UK and continental Europe has shifted from being purely an issue of recruitment to one of retaining and supporting the success of enrolled students, and seeing them through to gaining appropriate employment.

Therefore, it is the opinion of GLAS partners that the current climate is conducive to reconsidering the support and CPD available for staff who are in the role of enabling the access of non-traditional learners. The reasons for this are threefold: the current HE reforms which have tripled tuition fees have the potential for further disadvantaging those learners who do not wish to acquire debt; the fact that the population is aging throughout Europe; and, lastly, the overarching austerity measures meaning less financial freedom for all.

In the UK, institutional Access Agreements, are needed and have to be “ratified” by a branch of a government department, aptly named “The Office for Fair Access” (OFFA), in order to allow the institution to charge students more than £6,000 per annum. These documents are a statement of how institutions will ensure the access of non-traditional learners whilst charging higher fees, by providing a detailed description of whole institutional outreach targets. We believe that Access Agreements might need to better reflect institutional support for staff so that they can achieve these objectives.

In addition to this and from our prior learning within the GLAS project, we see opportunities for acquainting HEI staff with the tools and strategies we have been examining which have the potential to enable access (e.g. APL and WBL) because our work on GLAS has made it clear that these instruments are not universally regarded as widening participation and access tools.

4.5 Social mobility and widening participation

Despite subtle differences in definition and target groups between GLAS partners, they all recognised 'intergenerational' social mobility as important for a cohesive society. Importantly, all partners also recognised that this goal is not something that can be achieved by HEIs and colleges alone; rather a whole society approach is required in which opportunity for learning is equitable throughout an individual's life-time. The GLAS project included within its analysis an examination of widening participation strategies as it recognised that enhanced access to HE will be a key factor in achieving social mobility. Various strategies exist for widening participation and they were similar in essence across all three countries. They include work to remove the financial barriers to participation for under-represented groups and an increasing focus on retention strategies and initiatives. Beyond strategies organised by HEIs and FECs, the project concluded that cross-party and cross-ministerial government policies related to poverty and employment creation, alongside measures to make lifelong learning a 'reality', will be required to solve often intractable issues.

In the UK, discourse in this area, rather than addressing the other potential reasons for this, has developed a deficit model to explain these issues. This deficit model assumes that the learner lacks the correct tools to progress. What has, for a number of years now, been absent is any consideration of how the institutional workings and actions of course developers, admissions tutors and senior management, as well any unintended, or indeed intended, consequences of HE policy, are perpetuating barriers and reducing opportunities for lifelong learning for all.

The signs are that the current UK government's A level (Level 3 pre-HE qualification) reform programme which began this month, in the name of increasing rigour and standards, will make the present situation worse. This is because the top grades at A level may become harder to achieve and those students who miss a grade needed for university admission will be unable, unless they fund an earlier re-sit themselves, to re-sit their exams until a full academic year later.

In addition, the numbers of part-time and adult learners in higher education has rapidly decreased (40% and 7.1%, respectively) (HEFCE, 2013) since the tuition fees were tripled in the UK. Again, this is significant as learners in this demographic are more likely to be currently under-represented in HE. This is also of serious concern because, as described above, more mature students are needed to satisfy the increasing demands of the UK economy. When all these significant changes are considered we may be seeing, in the UK at least, the emergence of a

two-tiered higher education system, with research intensive institutions offering high cost prestigious courses to those (most likely) younger learners with the individual (parental) wealth and social capital to ensure entry, compared with a low cost alternative of HE perhaps delivered in further education colleges for the rest.

4.6 Community and civic engagement (CCE)

Unsurprisingly different countries and cultures have embraced different interpretations of CCE strategies. The Universitat i Rovira Virgili explored the topic through the lens of a single HEI with a “social contract” in Spain. The Dutch partners, ECHO and Zuyd, described a national approach which starts in the school sector, includes volunteering by adults, and considers various initiatives in the context of higher education. And Linking London examined CCE as undertaken by HEIs from the perspective of a partnership organisation in the UK. For the purposes of this paper we will focus on the CCE activity engaged in by HEIs in all partner countries.

Just as CCE is defined, and therefore interpreted, differently by the European partners, it is also defined, interpreted and manifested in different ways by HEIs in the UK. These manifestations range from ‘outreach’ and other ‘widening participation’ offers, through large- and small-scale research projects, to ‘public engagement’ lectures from staff and activities that can be broadly interpreted as ‘corporate and social responsibility’. All such activities have the potential to address entrenched issues of class and gender, which the GLAS project is focusing on, especially when approached in a strategic manner with buy in from those with key roles within the HEI, and supported operationally by staff who see this work as a key part of their mission. For the purposes of the GLAS project we defined CCE as the partnership or dialogue between HEIs/stakeholders and their surrounding geographical or cultural communities for mutual benefit.

Many universities across Europe have a long standing relationship with their locality, be it the inviting in of the local community to follow accredited courses or informal learning, or the use of university facilities. In the UK a great deal of CCE is through “public engagement” by HEIs, but its position in mission statements, and strategies and structures is not always obvious. This is in contrast to the situation in Spain where legislation states the participation of university in society enshrined within its governance system.

Therefore, from a UK perspective, it is possible that the full opportunities of CCE are not being realised. There may be a role within the new national strategy for access and student success to ensure that HEIs report on CCE in future

widening participation documentation. However, CCE and possibly some of the other core themes which have been explored by GLAS may be interpreted by some HEIs as superfluous to core business and are therefore more likely to be 'put on hold' during the current economic crisis. A counter argument could of course be made that in such a period of instability and economic turmoil it is the place of the HEI to contribute to local engagement and capacity building.

Incentives may well be needed to engage and invest in CCE activity, and naturally the passion of the vice chancellor or governing body for this area of work would help considerably. There might also be concern about future CCE activity because of the HEIs' focus on fee paying international (EU and non-EU) students, who may be in competition for places with local students. This brings into the debate the whole issue of the role, purpose and place of an HEI in its locality.

5. Conclusions

For two years the GLAS project partners have shared their local, regional and national experiences and knowledge. The combination of institutions and organisations has provided this particular European project with a unique perspective, which this paper has collated and reflected on from the viewpoint of Linking London.

The overarching message from GLAS is that overcoming barriers to lifelong learning requires joined up policy and practice at every level, from government, down to institutional and departmental quarters. However, and in addition to this strategic approach, it is encouraging to know that the UK higher and further education sectors already have at their disposal processes and strategies that, if used appropriately, could strengthen lifelong learning.

For example, we already have a way of acknowledging prior learning through a university level AP(E)L system. However, the system in the UK is not a nationally transparent, consistent and easily accessible system, unlike, for example, the system in the Netherlands. We therefore recommend that there be a national centre from which to promote AP(E)L to certain groups of individuals, and that tax breaks be used (as they are in the Netherlands) to encourage employers and individuals to use AP(E)L processes.

We feel that policy makers simply cannot ignore the implications of our aging demographic for European competitiveness; with nearly three-quarters of tomorrow's workforce having left compulsory education, the onus will be on employers to ensure that the workforce remains up to date and the country

economically effective. This is why we make recommendations for a government-fronted sustainable funding model for WBL and a set of national quality assurance guidelines.

Behind both AP(E)L and WBL is the need to know more about how many people take or use opportunities of learning in this way and what the benefits are to the individual and to the state. This is why we suggest that accurate, reliable, annual data should be published on national AP(E)L and WBL participation rates.

On the face of it, it seems obvious to state that an organisation should provide training and support for its employees so that they can meet the organisation's mission statement. However, since that is not the case when it comes to the widening participation agenda we suggest nationally recognised and accredited academic and professional qualifications for staff recruiting and supporting widening participation learners once enrolled.

In re-reading and reflecting on our recommendations we wonder if we have been too ambitious, since it is unlikely that the power dynamic between the university and learner will ever be challenged. However, universities are currently facing unprecedented demand, and if that demand should significantly alter, or the learner voice should directly "ask" for a different, more flexible provision, universities will need to respond or suffer the consequences of reduced funding. If demand significantly outstrips supply, in the quasi-market which has been created for UK HE, this is likely to be a way of sparking long-term change. However, we also acknowledge that a "degree" or other level 4 offer is not necessarily desired by all learners so we re-iterate the need for a government funded publicity campaign to achieve greater public acceptance of different types of qualification. We need more alternatives to the traditional three-year full-time degree, which directly links higher vocational level skills with the needs of the economy and promotes parity of esteem between academic and vocational awards.

In the meantime the GLAS project team sees the potential short-to-medium-term impact of its work as helping to begin to facilitate a cultural change within HEIs, the current culture being one in which the student is expected to 'fit' into the often rigid structures and processes of HEIs, which in many cases have inadvertently created barriers so that certain groups of people are prevented from participating in HE. The staffing structures of institutions play their part here also, hence our focus in year two on continuous professional development strategies to support the aims of GLAS. By raising the issues and adopting new approaches, staff within HEIs could be encouraged to consider and then

alter their current practice, which could therefore contribute to a change in the existing “culture” of an institution.

Ultimately the project partners believe that the HE funding reforms and austerity measures which many institutions are facing provide us with an opportunity to creatively re-imagine how we might use or recombine the tools that we already possess (e.g. AP(E)L and WBL to name but two). The six core themes were in fact chosen for their mix of process and ambition or target. We felt that the need to widen participation could not be discussed fully without incorporating a new look at the processes of AP(E)L and WBL, for example. Ultimately GLAS expects to benefit the HE sector as a whole by providing a way of ensuring that universities and colleges are open to a diverse range of individuals. As Page (2007) states: “Groups that display a range of perspectives outperform groups of like-minded experts. Diversity yields superior outcomes”. GLAS will help to ensure that talent within communities is not wasted, the benefits of which are manifold to the individual, HEIs, communities and the European community as a whole. An elaboration of the issues addressed in this paper can be found in the GLAS interim reports downloadable from our project website at <www.linkinglondon.ac.uk/europe>.

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