

The UK's coalition government has, in recent weeks, issued a White Paper entitled 'Students at the Heart of the System'.

This paper sets out the government's vision for higher education, which is summed up in the following, "We want to see more investment, greater diversity and less centralised control. But, in return, we want the sector to become more accountable to students as well as to the taxpayer". In the section that follows, further details about this position are provided, some of which raise as many questions as they answer, but I guess this is in part the purpose of a White Paper as there is an opportunity to comment on the ideas and proposals presented.

For Continuum, the White Paper has important implications for the way much current widening participation is funded, organised and delivered. There is a commitment given that widening participation for students from all backgrounds remains a key strategic objective for all higher education institutions. The role of the access agreements will be critical to the way individual universities set out their outputs from access activities, but also measure progress against appropriate targets chosen by the institution and agreed with the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). The White Paper therefore offers a mixture of continuity and change for widening participation and HE access. Continuum will be working as intensively as ever to provide the evidence base and arguments to support the sector in challenging itself, as well as government, to pursue programmes and effective policies, as well as building on the White Paper commitments.

If you would like to discuss collaboration with us, please email me at: j.storan@uel.ac.uk

Professor John Storan
Director of Continuum

International Summer Institute Beams Success!



John Shaw, PVC (International) at the University of East London presided over the presentation ceremony and social event for the select group of McNair scholars from the United States participating in the 2011 McNair programme at the Continuum International Summer Institute.

Federally funded through the US Department of Education the McNair programme is designed to enable income eligible undergraduates from underrepresented ethnic groups or first in family to attend higher education, to progress to postgraduate study with a view to becoming faculty in the future. Continuum has been working closely with a number of universities across the USA and also the Council for Opportunity in Education (COE) in the design and delivery of a unique research focussed programme.

Working in partnership with McNair programme directors from a range of institutions in the US, Continuum has developed a bespoke programme

which further enhances the skills scholars have acquired from their institution in the US, whilst at the same time providing them with an in-depth understanding of the English education system in general and widening participation in particular. In addition to attending seminars and presentations by leading academics, researchers and policy makers the scholars participated in an international conference (2011 FACE Conference at University of Glasgow) and pursued their own independent research.

In the UK, widening participation to postgraduate study is seriously under developed in terms of policy and consequently there are no coherent or structured programmes to support progression of non-traditional learners to postgraduate level study. The absence of research on this topic was highlighted in a recent Continuum seminar and this point was picked up in the White Paper: *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System*.

Continuum – Making Experience Count!

Continuum has just completed a focussed research study on the experience of students undertaking a higher education (HE) course at a further education (FE) college. Commissioned by the Association of Colleges (AoC) with sponsorship from the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) this study makes a timely and constructive contribution to the debate and development of HE in FE.

The aim of the research was to better understand, from a student perspective, issues around teaching and learning; college infrastructure; and creating an HE ethos. Over 90 learners contributed to the study by participating in the focus group interviews held at seven colleges across England.

Listening to learners revealed their diverse learning backgrounds and complex lives, with study commitments competing with work

and domestic responsibilities. For this reason, the majority of learners participating in the research made a positive decision to study at college, because it was geographically local and culturally familiar. For a number of learners, particularly those on vocational courses, the facilities and equipment at college were equal, or superior to, those at university. The research recognises that student experience varies, not just between, but also within colleges. What most learners wanted was recognition of their status as HE students; differentiation in terms of facilities and services; and in some cases prioritisation of these services. The organisation of HE in individual colleges and the extent to which it is integrated or separated is influenced by a number of factors including: tradition and mission; geographical location and estates; extent of HE provision and budgets. Above all learners valued small class sizes and access to their teachers.

So what can Continuum do for you?

As a busy research and development centre serving the UK and a growing number of international commissions, Continuum provides a full range of research services. However, we are constantly being asked to design and deliver very bespoke work packages to meet the needs of not just public bodies, universities, colleges, schools and training providers; but also a broader range of providers who want Continuum, for example, to calculate the social return on investment (SROI) for the funding being invested by the organisation. We have dedicated research staff that can provide tailor made SROI reviews with detailed reports on the social and economic returns from a funded project. With funding opportunities at an increasing premium, the

need to have an independent and established research centre undertake such an analysis, which can then be used to demonstrate the wider social returns with related financial returns, is perhaps even more important than it ever was. So, if you would like to discuss this or one of the many research services we provide, please contact our Research Manager, Tony Hudson at: a.hudson@uel.ac.uk



Continuum Director joins Milburn group

The UK government's Independent Reviewer on Social Mobility and Child Poverty Alan Milburn has invited Continuum Director, Professor John Storan to join an advisory group looking at the barriers to access HE. In his letter of invitation Alan Milburn spelt out his view about the centrality of universities to the government's social mobility agenda.

He said *"Universities clearly have a crucial role to play in society as an engine of social mobility, both through the world class education they provide and the outreach efforts they support. The latter is particularly important in the context of the new fees regime and the fair access agreements. This is why in my role as Independent Reviewer on Social Mobility and Child Poverty; I intend to make higher education a particular focus for my first report to parliament in spring next year"*.

Commenting on the invitation Continuum Director said *"The work that Alan Milburn has been asked to take forward by the government will be crucial in so many ways to progress being made on widening participation and the development of social engagement in HE. I will obviously be drawing extensively on the research work that has been undertaken here at Continuum over the last eight years. A great deal of this is highly relevant to work of this group. My concern that too little attention has been paid to the distribution of HE opportunities and far too much to a deficient model of learners fits very well with Alan Milburn's report on social mobility that has been so influential. So I very much look forward to working closely with him"*.