Over the last two years Continuum has organised a programme of international academic study visits. The central purpose of which has been to facilitate an exchange of practice and policy around widening participation. The latest visit involved a group of Swedish colleagues from the Karolinska Institutet and the Huddinge Gymnasiet upper secondary school in Stockholm. Access to Medicine and health related HE programmes were the specific focus for this visit. The group had a packed programme of meetings and discussions at King’s College, London and also met with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to discuss the funding arrangements in support of widening participation in HE. The interactive and participatory character of study visits offers unique opportunities for the exchange of experience around common issues. If you would like to discuss a study visit please contact Jacquey Bunn at j.bunn@uel.ac.uk

Welcome to the Winter edition of the newsletter. If there were any doubts that widening participation to learning opportunities was not a global issue then this edition of the Continuum newsletter should dispel them. News of developments in Australia, Sweden, England and Europe illustrates the extent to which questions of participation, exclusion and inclusion are on the agenda of colleagues worldwide. The challenges involved in making learning opportunities fully accessible should, as our contributors make clear, not be underestimated. The articles in this edition illustrate the need for a range of strategies and approaches, and illustrate how these must include an understanding of the different educational contexts and the various conditions which can act as barriers to participation.

John Storan
Director, Continuum

As always we would be delighted to receive short articles for future newsletters. Please forward contributions to continuum@uel.ac.uk

“Widening participation to university study through flexible delivery” was the title of a winter conference in London jointly organised by Continuum, the Forum for Access and Continuing Education (FACE) and the Education Subject Centre advancing learning and teaching in education (ESEcalate). The conference brought together practitioners and policy makers from across the UK. A wide range of issues were explored in the course of the day through a variety of workshop sessions. Keynote contributions were provided by Dr Liz Thomas from the Higher Education Agency; Professor John Storan, Director of Continuum; and Professor Mike Osborne from the University of Stirling. Many conference participants recognised the significance of flexible forms of delivery to promote Widening Participation. However, it was also felt that the relationship between flexibility and participation was far from simple, and that a more nuanced and critical exploration of this relation should be undertaken.
Widening Participation through APEL – a challenge for Europe?

The European Commission is very keen on the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) in all sectors of education. They are funding a large number of projects through Grundtvig, Leonardo and Joint Actions projects. For details see, for example www.transfine.net or www.eucen.org/Refine.html.

APEL in the UK was originally conceived as a tool for widening participation by providing an alternate access route into undergraduate studies for those without the usual entry qualifications. This objective remains a key motivation in those universities where APEL is taken seriously. However, the challenges and motivations in the rest of the European Union are rather different. In France, for example, there is a much more radical approach now in place; people have the right to apply for “validation of their experience” for the award of a whole degree, both undergraduate and post-graduate. The policy is historically rooted in an economic notion of social inclusion, providing access to qualifications that enable people to enter, re-enter or transfer within the labour market.

In most other EU countries, universities are unable to admit people to any course at the university unless they have the standard entry qualification (equivalent to A levels) and so here developments are taking place around APEL as a way of giving credit or exemption for part of the course.

The motivation for APEL development varies. In many of the new EU member states APEL is used to make sense of parts of diplomas and courses taken under “former times” or during the period of rapid change following 1989.

Realising opportunities: An Australian partnership project

The UQ Boilerhouse Community Engagement Centre has begun work on a project to develop stronger university/community links, specifically to consolidate relationships between the University of Queensland (UQ), Australia and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities in the Inala-Ipswich corridor in South East Queensland. The project is seeking to increase access to higher education for potential students from diverse backgrounds, including both young people still at school, as well as mature students who may be thinking about returning to study. The project, which is funded under the Australian Commonwealth’s Higher Education Equity Support Program, will form the basis of a broader range of on-going outreach initiatives by UQ.

In the initial stages, the project will explore the attitudes, understanding, expectations and aspirations of potential CALD students and their families to higher education, while the second stage will explore innovative ‘inside-out’ approaches for immersing outreach activities into CALD community groups. This will involve working closely with communities to establish appropriate processes whereby these groups, with support from UQ, will be able to identify, nurture and support potential students in their efforts to gain entrance to higher education.

To find out more about this project, please contact Sue Scull at s.scull@uq.edu.au.

Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs)

Continuum Centre Associate, Professor Robin Smith, and Research Manager Tony Hudson, have been commissioned by Birkbeck College to undertake research on behalf of the Linking London LLN. It’s focus will be public service, including education, health and health sciences, and voluntary and community sectors.

Funded by HEFCE, the strategic aim of LLNs is to make a step change in vocational progression, either from work into HE or from FE into HE. It is expected that LLNs will combine the strengths of a number of diverse institutions, provide support for learners on vocational pathways; bring greater clarity, coherence and certainty to progression opportunities; and develop the curriculum to facilitate progression.