

## Moving Forward: Enhancing progression through partnership. A Practice Report

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### Abstract

*This practice report presents a university-wide strategic approach to enhancing the first-year student experience and to improving transition, progression and retention, called Moving Forward. Glasgow Caledonian University is a so-called post-1992 university with a high percentage of students from non-traditional, low-participation backgrounds, often coming into university as direct entrants onto levels two and three (of a four-level Scottish undergraduate degree). Its aim is to support a transformational approach to widening participation and the development of a transition pedagogy. Partnership working stands at its centre and underpins all activities from developing a Transition and Progression Framework, establishing a large Community of Practice and six Mini Communities of Practice, to negotiating formal partnership agreements with academic schools, Learner Support and the Students' Association. The report charts the reasons for introducing Moving Forward, its development, activities, interim evaluation outcomes, achievements, as well as the challenges of sustaining such an initiative long term.*

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## Introduction

*Moving Forward* is a university-wide initiative at Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) that represents a coordinated institutional strategy for transition, progression and evidence-based practice focusing on partnership working between the Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning, the Caledonian Academy, all academic schools, Learner Support, the Students' Association, Academic Registry, Marketing and Communications, and other support departments. This development forms the basis of the University's Strategic Plan for the Scottish Funding Council's Widening Access and Retention Premium allocation (now Horizon Fund).

The aims of *Moving Forward* are to:

- improve progression rates;
- enhance the student experience in terms of transition to GCU;
- develop, support the implementation of, and evaluate the GCU Transition and Progression Framework (GCU TPF) in conjunction with the Learning, Teaching, and Assessment Strategy (LTAS) and other relevant university policies; and
- provide greater support for staff in developing and implementing strategies to address issues associated with transition and progression.

The initiative is closely informed by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Scotland First-Year Experience Quality Enhancement Theme (QET). It is based on the outcomes of the QET Transition project (Whittaker, 2008), research on the first-year student experience (Krause, 2003;

Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003; McInnis, James & Smith, 1995; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998; Thomas et al., 2005) and research on the need for a coordinated institutional approach to transition strategies (Campbell, 2006; Cook, Rushton, McCormick & Southall, 2005; Harvey, Drew & Smith, 2006). The need for "more major cultural, philosophical and pedagogical shifts regarding the nature and purpose of the first year" (Whittaker, 2008, p. 4) has been recognised. The need to motivate as many stakeholders as possible, including students, to participate in the development of new policies and frameworks is crucial for gaining support and endorsement for change. Therefore, *Moving Forward's* university-wide partnership model constitutes a central element of the university's strategic approach to the first year and student engagement (Barrie, Ginns & Prosser, 2005; Harvey et al., 2006; Kift, 2009; Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010; Krause, 2003, 2005, 2006; Quality Assurance Agency [QAA], 2005; Whittaker, 2008) and a move away from a utilitarian model towards an all-inclusive, transformational model of widening participation (Thomas, 2005).

## Major elements and key activities of *Moving Forward*

### *Consultation*

A consultation with all stakeholders (academic staff, students, support staff and administration) across the university was undertaken to identify the causes of the lack of student engagement and progression. Consultation sessions were run at each of the academic schools and student-facing support departments. The academic schools and support departments were asked to invite a wide range of their members of staff to participate in those

sessions. The consultation exercise began with a presentation of the findings of the University's Student Experience Project (SEP) in relation to student engagement, progression and retention. This was followed by a discussion of four main questions:

- What are the issues associated with progression and engagement within your programs/services?
- What strategies are you currently using to address these issues?
- In what ways would you like to improve transition and progression support?
- What examples of practice/case studies could be included in the framework resource from your School/Department?

The consultation notes were iterated between the *Moving Forward* team and the participating School/Departments until a final version was agreed. These notes have been since made available on the *Moving Forward* website for staff and students.

A Service Design event consolidated the consultation. A stimulus paper based on the findings of the consultation sessions was circulated prior to the event. The event itself focused on the first year at GCU, which includes levels 2 and 3 for direct entrants from college. Its purpose was to support the development of the GCU TPF, engage more members of staff and students in our partnership working and thereby encourage support for the implementation of the framework.

The outcomes of the consultation were underpinned by student focus group discussions, research by the SEP, and outcomes of the National Student Survey, the university's New2GCU and ReviewGCU

surveys and the Students' Association's Class Rep Conference.

### *Development of the GCU Transition and Progression Framework (TPF)*

The GCU TPF represents a holistic approach to the student experience. It integrates and supports all activities linked to student engagement and to supporting student transition and progression within the academic schools, and at the central level. Its development was an iterative process, asking the members of the *Moving Forward* Community of Practice to comment on the framework in relation to content and format.

The framework offers strategies and guidance. It is flexible and reflects the diverse nature of the university and as such allows the academic schools, support departments, the administration and the Students' Association to identify their own action plans to support transition and progression. The framework covers two main areas: pre-entry/transition and Learning, Teaching, Assessment and Feedback, encouraging a reflection and review of current practice. It lists strategies and possible action points against the principles of effective transition support identified by Whittaker (2008), promoting approaches to embed support within the curriculum. These include the development of a "first-year pedagogy," more project-based work, enabling and empowering students to help shape the learning and teaching experience, personal development planning, feedback as a dialogue and early formative assessment. Thus, the framework is directly linked to the implementation of the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy (LTAS). Moreover, the framework is continually being developed as a resource for staff and

students, providing examples of practice as well as information on national and international research and development on progression and retention. These resources are gathered by the *Moving Forward* team as well as through the *Moving Forward* Community of Practice and are made available on the *Moving Forward* website.

### *Partnership agreements with the Academic Schools, Learner Support and the Students' Association*

While *Moving Forward* has been successful in developing a collaborative relationship with staff with responsibility for student support and the implementation of the LTAS, work now focuses on engaging more program and module leaders in the initiative. Pedagogical change is required if the university is to enhance effectively the transition process and improve student engagement and progression (Kift, 2009; Kift et al., 2010; Thomas, 2005; Whittaker, 2008). For this reason, formal partnership agreements with the academic schools, Learner Support and the Students' Association, signed by the Deans and the Heads of Learning and Teaching Quality or equivalent, are now being negotiated. They are a direct result of an interim evaluation of *Moving Forward* and are considered the best way forward.

The aims of the partnership agreements are to enhance partnership working across the University in order to support the implementation of the GCU TPF, the LTAS and other relevant university policies, enabling the academic schools and other departments to identify their own priority areas. Some of the areas identified are: induction (long thin, covering the whole of the student life cycle throughout all levels of study), academic advice, online assessment, feedback, blended learning/e-

learning, researching the part-time student experience, and staff development. *Moving Forward* has also offered development funding awards to the academic schools (£6,000 per school) as part of the agreements. Six projects are now underway, all of which include pro-active student involvement, since this was one of the funding conditions.

The partnership agreements offer a long-term, sustainable approach to improving transition, progression and retention as well as student engagement. They also provide the university with tangible outcomes and enable staff and students to engage with and participate in processes of change across the institution as a whole. The latter is essential given the current economic climate and the prospect of funding cuts within the higher education sector.

### *Mini Communities of Practice (Mini CoPs)*

After the Service Design event, six Mini Communities of Practice (Mini CoPs) were established, based on main areas identified by students and staff throughout the consultation, such as learning and teaching, assessment, and feedback; student empowerment; liaison with schools and colleges; induction; peer support; and internal and external communication. They are facilitated by *Moving Forward*, have between 10 and 53 members (staff, students and members from partner organisations), meet twice during every semester, and have been well attended throughout. The Mini CoPs encourage cross-university communication and discussion. Current activities include a student-led development of a feedback poster and the development of a guidance document in support of a shared

understanding of independent learning by students and staff. In order to enable them to turn some of their discussions into practice, *Moving Forward* has also offered development funding awards (£4,000 per Mini Cop) and three projects are now underway.

The Mini CoP activities also offer tangible outcomes that can be monitored and evaluated. They provide a platform for members of staff and students to engage with each other across the university and thus enhance communication and the sharing of practice.

### Interim Evaluation

GCU offers a wide range of activities aimed at enhancing the student experience and it is difficult to discern the impact of any individual initiative. Furthermore, the National Student Survey and the International Student Barometer cannot measure the complexity of factors that impact on the student experience and therefore it requires more in-depth research with the inclusion of qualitative data to measure the impact of *Moving Forward*.

The evaluation included a web-based survey, evaluation pro-formas handed out at events and Mini CoP meetings, and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, including Deans and Heads of Learning and Teaching Quality. It focused on four key aspects of the work of *Moving Forward*, aspects that could reasonably be assessed before December 2009:

- *Moving Forward's* partnership approach;
- How the GCU TPF is perceived by the wider GCU community;

- Feedback on the impact of the Mini CoPs; and
- What kind of priorities the wider GCU community would like to be seen taken on by *Moving Forward*.

Data derived from the interim evaluation was exceptionally positive:

- More than 70% of respondents were aware of the partnership approach;
- A strong view was expressed (survey, pro-formas and interviews) that the schools need to be more actively involved and collaborate closely with *Moving Forward* to ascertain the sustainability of the partnership approach, allow the schools to take ownership, and to turn policy into practice;
- 67% of respondents to the web-based survey find the Framework useful/very useful; and
- Over 70% of survey respondents view the Mini CoPs positively, providing strong evidence that *Moving Forward* has been successful in enabling cross-institutional communication and discussion.

### Achievements and key outcomes to date

Since the beginning of *Moving Forward* in October 2007, the initiative has accomplished many outcomes and achievements. Additionally, it evolves and adapts to new circumstances. Its key achievements and outcomes include:

- Evidence gathering on issues associated with student transition, engagement and progression through an extensive consultation exercise;

- Engagement with staff and students across the university;
- Partnership working;
- Development and ratification of the GCU TPF;
- Development and continued expansion of six Mini CoPs;
- Negotiation and establishment of partnership agreements with the six academic schools, Learner Support and the Students' Association;
- Introducing *Moving Forward* Development Funding Awards and launching ten pilot projects with the potential for a university-wide roll-out;
- Sharing of practice, issues and ideas internally and externally; and
- Dissemination through GCU events and through national and international conferences.

With its partnership agreements, *Moving Forward* aims to achieve a transformational model of widening participation (Thomas, 2005) and the student experience overall. These are aimed at supporting staff in developing strategies not only to enhance the student experience in relation to additional student support, but also to review the curriculum and allow members of staff to reflect on pedagogy and new approaches to learning and teaching. For instance, a recent success was the adoption of a model for embedded study skills support in one of the academic schools following a series of workshops based on Kift's (2009) transition pedagogy and an internal example of practice led by the *Moving Forward* team. Further outcomes of the partnership agreements are that the *Moving Forward* team has been invited to participate in some of the academic schools' Learning and Teaching

meetings/seminars as well as academic school strategy meetings with an agreed focus on staff engagement and development. This signifies an acknowledgement that enhancing the student experience requires a reflection and review of curriculum development and program delivery. The partnership approach offers a model for engagement that is encouraging and non-threatening to staff. However, the challenge of this approach cannot be underestimated. Against the background of the current economic climate, the prospective cuts in public funding and the recently announced major restructuring of the university, securing the engagement of staff and students will be a challenge that *Moving Forward* has to face in the near future. However, with its track record of partnership working, the facilitation of the Mini CoPs and the continued sharing of practice, it is anticipated that *Moving Forward* will retain its level of staff engagement.

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