Developing flexible learning degree programmes for early childhood practitioners: using students' perceptions to inform programme development and promote widening access.

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Abstract

For over 10 years the School of Early Childhood, UWTSD has developed undergraduate flexible route degree programmes, allowing students to maintain employment while studying fulltime. The programmes are innovative in terms of modes of delivery and a focus on bilingual / Welsh medium provision. Questionnaire research with cohorts of School of Early Childhood, UWTSD students undertaking flexible route programmes in 2009 and 2014 provided both quantitative and qualitative data highlighting students' perceptions and experiences of accessing higher education provision. The data collected indicated that students perceived barriers and challenges when retuning to higher education study similar to those discussed in widening access research literature including a lack of confidence and financial constraints. The feedback from the questionnaires also provided suggestions for how admissions staff and lecturers could support these students to access flexible provision including the development of friendly, individualized admissions days, targeting promotional material at childcare and early years settings and being sensitive to the particular needs and challenges of studying alongside work and family commitments. Students also provided suggestions on how to improve or develop programme delivery.

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Developing flexible learning degree programmes for early childhood practitioners
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These findings have allowed School of Early Childhood staff to consider how the students' experiences shape the success of the flexible route programmes and to develop systems to respond to the needs highlighted by students and thus to promote widening access to education by non-traditional groups. This research has also encouraged the development of new innovative programme models.

Keywords: flexible learning, early childhood training and education, widening access

Introduction

The focus on the importance of high quality early childhood care and education in Wales (WG, 2013; WAG, 2011; DCELLS, 2008; WAG, 2005) and the UK (Melhuish, 2004; Sylva et al., 2004) has emphasised the need for well trained and highly skilled professionals within the sector. The development of early years programmes such as Flying Start and the Foundation Phase Framework (DCELLS, 2008) in Wales have reinforced the need for upskilling and staff development to fulfil the Welsh Government's commitments to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and therefore a care and education sector where the wellbeing and rights of young children are recognised and supported (WG, 2014; WG, 2013). The child care and education sector has developed increasing opportunities for graduate employment (WG, 2013). Higher education providers linked to early childhood subjects must therefore create opportunities for early childhood practitioners to explore pertinent children's rights issues such as poverty, safeguarding and wellbeing within accessible graduate level provision.

There are however challenges and barriers in providing accessible and effective higher education programmes within the early childhood sector. These include providing provision for those who have limited time and financial resources to study around work and family commitments. This is particularly pertinent in a low wage sector dominated by a female workforce with young families or other care commitments. The School of Early Childhood, UWTSD has recognised that to engage this important group of learners requires a flexible learning route which can work with the students'

commitments and which can be developed by active engagement with the students' needs. This also dovetails with the widening access to higher education agenda in Wales and increasing participation amongst non traditional students. During the late 1990s statistics relating to participation in higher education demonstrated that those in lower socio-economic groups remained underrepresented within higher education (Jary & Parker, 1998). The Dearing Report (National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education, 1997) highlighted that 'non –traditional students' such as mature students remained unrepresented within the higher education system and suggested strategies for engaging these marginalized groups and increasing their participation.

In Wales post devolution the Reaching Higher strategy was published by the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) (WAG, 2002) highlighting the importance for Welsh higher education institutions to adopt a student centred approach and widening access to a diversity of different students. This provided the brief for the Higher Education Funding Council Wales (HEFCW) Reaching Wider initiative which set targets and premiums for increased participation by identified groups:-students from Communities First areas (100 most deprived areas in Wales according to socio-economic indices), disabled students, Welsh medium students and students from BME backgrounds (HEFCW, n.d.). These groups represent those also forming part of the early childhood workforce and thus developing programmes for these groups would support the delivery of accessible early childhood undergraduate provision.

Designing the Flexible Learning Route in terms of Widening Access Literature and Philosophy

Sheeran, Brown and Baker (2007) highlight that widening participation can be viewed as taking three approaches or philosophies: *meritocratic* where higher education (HE) is opened up via different engagement / participation exercises to academically suitable candidates without losing the academic rigour / level of the candidate; *democratic* where the nature of higher education changes and becomes more user friendly with a non-traditional delivery and curriculum; *transformative* where higher education itself is transformed to democratize learning and knowledge, and to value more than traditional academic knowledge. In designing and delivering the flexible learning route described

Developing flexible learning degree programmes for early childhood practitioners
using students' perceptions to inform programme development
and promote widening access.   *2014 Future Directions Wales Conference*

here these different approaches were considered and will be highlighted in the later sections.

Osborne (2003) also highlights different approaches to widening participation the *academic* (supporting and raising students academic achievement to enter HE)*, cultural* (raising awareness of HE provision) and *internal* (changing the nature of an institutes internal structures to support widening participation). The flexible learning route delivered here developed a cultural approach initially with a view to raise student awareness of available courses beyond the traditional day time routes, but has also adapted the School's internal structures and practice to accommodate flexible learning (discussed later).

Gordon, Dumbleton and Miller (2010) highlight the *macro* (political and geographical), *meso* (institutional factors) and *micro* (personal experiences of students and tutors) can influence student participation and achievement. The flexible provision described in this paper has allowed tutors at the micro level to reflect upon and evaluate the flexible provision in order to improve the student engagement. In recent years the tutors have also been able to support the meso level in terms of UWTSD widening access policy and developing new community and fast track provision (discussed later).

The Flexible Learning Route

In 2002, the School of Early Childhood recognised that there was a pool of students working in the child care and education sector that would value opportunities to undertake a full time degree in early childhood but would be unable to commit to traditional full time day study due to work commitments. The opportunity to study a flexibly delivered, full time, three year programme, as opposed to a longer part time route would also provide benefits for those seeking a route into a PGCE or Social Work postgraduate qualification. The target group were envisaged as being experienced practitioners with level 3 vocational qualifications in child care or allied subjects and would be working as practitioners. The flexible learning route was developed to include contact sessions (lectures and tutorials) one evening a week (4.15-8.15) and occasional Saturdays within a term, with admission requirements that participants were over 25 years old, working within the child care and education sector and held a relevant level 3

qualification. The flexible learning route from its inception was able to recruit viable cohorts and was developed with a democratic approach (Sheeran et al., 2007) in terms of providing provision that was accessible and user friendly, and transformative (Sheeran et al., 2007) in terms of recognising vocational and experiential qualities rather than academic entry requirements alone.

The nature of the delivery of flexible learning route sessions is very different to that of the traditional day time cohorts. Groups are smaller (approximately 15) and learning is often based on peer discussion where the students and staff are able to tap the wealth of experiences in childhood settings provided by the student. There is therefore a strong cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 2009) element to the flexible learning route and an emphasis on the socio constructive (Vygotsky, 1978) ethos of building on current experiences and reframing and revaluating current practice and knowledge in light of the research and theory explored during the degree. The flexible route thus promotes debate and discussion, as well as the reflective practice and learning required to reconstruct knowledge and values, essential when promoting the move towards rights based child care and education. This also reflects the democratic and transformative nature highlighted by Sheeran et al., (2007) where the learning environment was designed to support and promote student engagement and value the knowledge and experience provided by the student cohort.

Welsh Medium and Bilingual Provision

An important aspect of the School of Early Childhood's portfolio of programmes has been a commitment to Welsh medium and bilingual provision, where programmes are fully available in English and / or Welsh. This is an important aspect of the flexible route partly as response to government policy such as the *Iaith Pawb Action Plan for a Bilingual Wales* (WAG, 2003), partly as a requirement to support the bilingual ethos of the Foundation Phase in Wales (DCELLS, 2008) and partly to provide courses that reflect the bilingual nature of the target catchment area in areas such as Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion and Pembrokeshire where students work and wish to study through the medium of Welsh. The flexible group also provides an important option for students travelling from Swansea, Neath / Port Talbot and other areas currently working in Welsh medium settings.

Developing flexible learning degree programmes for early childhood practitioners
using students' perceptions to inform programme development
and promote widening access.   *2014 Future Directions Wales Conference*

Student Perceptions

In 2009 and 2014 the perceptions of flexible learning route students' experiences of the programme were collected in a questionnaire designed with a mix of open ended and closed questions. The questionnaires were designed to support both the development and recruitment of the flexible route programme in order to respond to the needs of the students and to engage with a wider potential student group. The questionnaire also complemented informal discussion with students relating to the degree programme and tutors own observations.

Method

In November, 2009 level 4, 5 and 6 flexible learning BA Early Years Education degree students were asked to complete the questionnaire. Questionnaires were distributed to 45 students and 40 returned the questionnaires (88.9% response rate). In May, 2014 another cohort of flexible level 4, 5 and 6 BA Early Years Education or Early Childhood degree students were provided with the same questionnaire. From a possible 59 students, 34 questionnaires were returned (57.6% response rate). Questionnaires in both 2009 and 2014 were distributed to students at the end of their lectures and were returned in subsequent lectures. The difference in response rate may reflect the different times of year of distributing the questionnaires, however the questionnaire was designed to raise issues rather than compare the two year groups' responses and thus the response rate disparity was not deemed problematic.

Questionnaires included some closed questions to ascertain information such as age, and entry qualifications. However the majority of the questions were open questions designed to provide extended answers as written text. These questions were designed in response to the issues highlighted in the widening access literature noted previously as a means to explore the perceptions students had of higher education and the challenges and opportunities they had experienced when accessing and engaging with the flexible learning route programmes. The questions were also designed to allow students to explain their own views on how to improve the recruitment, admissions, and delivery of the flexible learning route programmes.

British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011) ethical guidance and Manion, Cohen and Morrison (2011) were used to support ethical considerations. Ethical approval was provided by the School's Research Ethics process. The questionnaire was given to students with a detailed explanation letter to explain the context for the research and the students all gave signed consent that they were willing to participate. Due to the questionnaire being administered by the students' tutors it was important to ensure students were given a free choice in terms of whether they wanted to participate and that they did not feel coerced into taking part in order to please the tutor. The anonymity and confidentiality of the students was retained and no names or other personal information is provided within this article.

Responses to closed questions were inputted into the SPSS statistical package in order to collate the data and calculate percentage values. Open questions were analysed interpretively with the content of answers compared and common themes within different answers highlighted. For the purposes of this particular article the questionnaires were analysed in order to highlight student views and perceptions and themes linked to:

- the barriers and challenges of accessing higher education study;
- methods of encouraging participation and raising awareness of flexible learning;
- views on online methods of learning.

The themes highlighted have supported the development and direction of future flexible learning provision in the School of Early Childhood.

Feedback and Discussion

Moore, Sanders and Higham (2013) note that flexible provision can be potentially attractive to those who have other responsibilities and work commitments. In 2009 and 2014, 94% and 95% of students respectively noted that they would not be able to access higher education provision if it were not delivered flexibly thus supporting the democratic perspectives of Sheeran et al., (2007) where the curriculum should be tailored to support non-traditional student participation. The majority of students noting that financial issues meant they needed to retain work commitments.

Developing flexible learning degree programmes for early childhood practitioners
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and promote widening access.   *2014 Future Directions Wales Conference*

Table 1.   Barriers and Challenges to Accessing Higher Education Highlighted by Students in 2009 and 2014 Study

Financial Constraints	Lack of support	Family commitments such as carer	Lack of child care	Lack of confidence	Illness	Other issues
2009						
28 (29.0%)	11 (11.5 %)	22 (22.9%)	11 (11.5%)	25 (26.0%)	5 (5.2%)	5 (5.2%)
2014						
16 (26.7%)	8 (13.3%)	11 (18.3%)	6 (10.0%)	13 (21.7%)	2 (3.3%)	4 (6.6%)

The research also highlighted the approach students would value in terms of supporting their application and recruitment onto the flexible route as well as supporting their progression during study. Themes identified during analysis of questionnaires included:

- approachable, friendly tutors sensitive to the pressures faced by students and admissions processes able to alleviate student misconceptions and lack of confidence.
- targeting promotional material at child care and early years settings and recruitment and marketing visits to the childcare sector in person to promote the programme;
- providing opportunities for applicants to meet current students and graduates;
- distance and blended learning.

Approachable, Friendly Tutors Sensitive to the Pressures Faced by Students and Admissions Processes able to Alleviate Student Misconceptions and Lack of Confidence.

Feedback highlighted that prospective students benefit from knowing that non-traditional routes exist and that admissions staff need to reinforce that experience outside conventional academic study is also valued.

Respondent 1, 2014 suggested

possibly a taster session prior to applying to discuss course requirements and provide reassurance

Respondent 3, 2014 noted the need to

focus more on life experiences than academic qualifications

and Respondent 6, 2014 also noted the need to

demonstrate that their transferable skills from working life can bring as much knowledge to a degree course as completing A-level study at 18.

Participant 9, 2014 also highlighting

awareness that you don't need A-levels to do this, as this was my barrier for a long time.

Several respondents also noted the need for tutors to be approachable, sensitive and understanding of the extra demands placed on students from family and work commitments. Moore et al. (2013) also highlighted that widening participation learners may have particular needs linked to work, life and study balance.

In light of such feedback the flexible route has developed recruitment and admission procedures sensitive to the challenges and barriers identified by students. For example, applicants or those expressing an interest are invited for informal discussions or open evenings so that they can share experiences and be aware that other students will have similar experiences and motivations about returning to study. Open evenings are planned in the evening to fit in with participants work commitments and are informal discussions over refreshments with a view to remove some of the barriers perceived by students about the formality of higher education.   Several of the lecturing and admissions team are themselves past flexible learners and mature students and this helps provide role models for applicants, and also staff who are able to empathise with the barriers and challenges faced by new applicants. The team are also available to support students engage with the UCAS process and to provide contacts with the Student Services Unit to discuss financial issues and the support available with funding.

Developing flexible learning degree programmes for early childhood practitioners
using students' perceptions to inform programme development
and promote widening access.   *2014 Future Directions Wales Conference*

The admissions team also provide opportunities for students to meet individually and discuss the programme. This again supports a Sheeran et al., (2007) democratic approach to widening access and Osborne's (2003) suggestion that internal structures change to support participation.

Targeting Promotional Material at Childcare and Early Years Settings and Recruitment and Marketing Visits to the Childcare Sector in Person to Promote the Programme.

Respondent 3, 2014 suggested

make the flexible option more visible on the website, sell it more to mature working students

Respondent 9, 2014 also suggested

You need to advertise this in schools, Ysgol Feithrin and Libraries. People need to know about it.

Other respondents also suggested that course details and advertisements should be placed in mother and toddler groups, job centres, nurseries, schools, local authorities and in low paid work sectors. Other respondents highlighted that the flexible degree provision should be promoted to mature students completing level 3 courses and part time and evening courses.

Questionnaire feedback reinforces the importance that School of Early Childhood staff continue targeting marketing at local schools, nurseries, family centres and other settings. Leaflets and emails are also addressed specifically for the attention of LSAs and nursery assistants, rather than for the setting generally, with a view to raise awareness with the most appropriate learners. Local links with Further Education (FE) Colleges are also valuable in terms of Open Days and marketing opportunities to raise awareness of provision especially for Foundation Degree students who may want to use the flexible route as a means to complete level 6 of an early childhood degree. However flexible route student feedback has also highlighted the need for the School of Early Childhood to raise awareness of the degree through community and setting visits. The School of Early Childhood staff are developing this aspect of their work to encourage

primary school and nursery visits which complement the marketing and awareness raising activities such as UCAS days, secondary school / FE presentations and Open Days familiar to the traditional route applicants. Current marketing resources are also developed to show images and student stories which promote the flexible provision and include mature non-traditional students. These developments also reflect Osborne (2003) cultural approach in terms of raising awareness of accessible provision.

Providing Opportunities for Applicants to Meet Current Students and Graduates.

Questionnaire responses suggested that respondents would have valued the opportunity to meet current students during the admissions process. Respondent 11, 2009 highlighted the need for

> *Frequent open days- opportunities for mature students to chat with mature graduates who have previously been in their shoes.*

Respondent 15, 2009 suggested

> *Make people aware that these courses are available and invite past students in to relive their experiences both financially and educationally. Also have examples of work for people to see what the course involves. I personally had not written an essay since I left schools at 16!!*

Respondent 16, 2009 noted the benefits of

> *Employing the services of students like myself to go into the schools and talk to people to make them realize it is an attainable goal and they are going to have better skills to impart to the children they work with*

Moore et al. (2013) note that positive role models provide important information advice and guidance when widening participation and the School of Early Childhood are developing systems to support current flexible route students and graduates to engage with prospective students. Several members of the School of Early Childhood staff have themselves studied flexible provision as mature students and can themselves also act as positive role models.

Developing flexible learning degree programmes for early childhood practitioners
using students' perceptions to inform programme development
and promote widening access.   *2014 Future Directions Wales Conference*

Distance and Blended Learning

Students on the flexible learning route were asked their opinion on studying through distance learning methods. In, 2009,41.5% suggested they would value such provision and 51.3% suggested they did not want such provision with 7.3% indicating they were not sure. In 2014,36.4% suggested they would value this provision, with 57.6 % indicated they would not and 6.1% indicated they were not sure. Comments provided highlighted views such as:

> *I think having contact time with lecturers is a crucial part of studying and understanding expectations of module outcomes* (Respondent 1, 2014).

> I *need college sessions to motivate me and I can ask questions* (Respondent 7, 2014).

> *I like the hands on knowledge and support from lecturers (Respondent 11, 2014)*

> *I feel more focused when attending College sessions. (Respondent 14, 2014)*

Several responses from those who would consider distance learning also highlighted the importance of regular face to face contact with tutors. This may reflect the discussion based learning which occurs in the flexible route and may also highlight that early childhood courses require an element of personal interaction and practical engagement. The School has however considered blended learning as a possible approach where students do attend face to face session but also have some material online which provides activities to be undertaken at home. To date this has not been explored fully in the undergraduate provision but could provide an important tool for future students. Postgraduate provision within the School of Early Childhood has used this method successfully to combine face to face and on line study and will be explored further as a means to allow more students to access higher education.

Diverse New and Flexible Programmes

Discussion with current flexible students, as well as responding to national and University strategic objectives has also allowed the School of Early Childhood to recently diversify and develop its portfolio of flexible learning initiatives, and this has

allowed the development of programmes which can provide intensive full time study, less intensive part time study, Welsh medium provision and community based programmes.

A Two Year Flexible Learning Degree

Flexible learning route students have highlighted (in discussions with Early Childhood) staff that the three years programme has several lulls or periods where it would be possible to study and thus the degree would take less time to complete. In traditional degrees students have often completed an academic degree in terms of teaching in mid to late May, and do not start lectures again until late September. Christmas and Easter holidays are also longer than in schools or other settings. In light of student feedback the School of Early Childhood intend to create a two year programme which would make use of lulls from May to July and some of the holiday time to deliver lectures and assessment. This would mean studying 360 credits (18 modules) in two years (nine 20 credit modules per year) and thus students would study level 4 and half of level 5 in one year and half of level 5 and level 6 in the next year. Two year fast track programmes are gaining some ground in the UK especially in the field of law, business and IT and are now part of the political discussion in Wales (BBC, 2014). In the field of early childhood a two year programme is relatively new in the Welsh context but for the flexible learning route students could provide advantages including, being able to access PGCE or MSc Social Work provision sooner and using their study time more efficiently. However the benefits of two year provision are also contested (UCU, 2010) and the results of this pilot will serve to highlight issues pertinent to the flexible learning route.

The two year route has been designed to run as a pilot form late September 2014, but its development has highlighted several challenges and considerations during its planning. Creating a two year degree involves allied changes in centralised systems such as finance and registration departments. For example registration processes will need to start sooner than for traditional students, as a two year student will start lectures at the beginning of September and thus induction and registration procedures will need to reflect this. Exam boards and progression boards between levels of study would also need to be designed to accommodate mid-semester or mid-term progression. The fee for a two year programme will also need to be adjusted appropriately and this will need to be in coordination with external bodies responsible for student loans and other

Developing flexible learning degree programmes for early childhood practitioners
using students' perceptions to inform programme development
and promote widening access.   *2014 Future Directions Wales Conference*

funding. Such information is also essential when marketing new provision so that students are able to make informed decisions and thus communicating all relevant information is important to the success of a new development.

A new programme, alongside other programme commitments, also has important staff considerations especially where the flexible learning route is delivered in the evening and on weekends.The development of the two year timetable has considered the implications of the new pilot in terms of staff work balance. This aspect of the course will also be an important issue when evaluating the pilot. At the moment it is likely that the pilot will be delivered one module at a time, with a module studied over a short period, as opposed to several modules studied together over a longer semester (as in the traditional day time and three year flexible learning route).

The condensed and intense nature of a two year programme also provides important considerations in terms of recruitment and marketing. It is important that students are given important messages in terms of the intensity and commitment involved in completing a degree over two years. The recruitment process will need to develop procedures which can identify applicants who may find the intensive course challenging and may be more suitable to another approach such as a Foundation Degree or three year study. This process is being developed at the moment and will be evaluated in terms of student and staff experience during the two year pilot and will provide opportunities to explore the micro experiences of students and staff highlighted by Gordon et al., (2010) but will also have implications for evaluating the feasibility of two year degrees at the meso institutional level (Gordon et al. 2010) as this pilot will inform beyond the School of Early Childhood.

Community Based Foundation Degrees

Alongside the current development of the two year pilot programme the School of Early Childhood has recently recruited students onto new part time Foundation Degrees (2013-1014). These have been developed as community based programmes delivered in areas away from the University campus. Two Welsh medium groups of students are now in their first year (level 4) in Cardiff and Bridgend with community based tutors dedicated to delivering this programme as part of a Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol

project. A new English medium group is also intended to start in September 2014 in Aberystwyth. These programmes are also targeted at those working in the child care and education sector but offer a less intense approach to that of the flexible route. These students will however also have an option to top up their Foundation Degree with full level 6 study, and current methods of supporting this transfer are being investigated. Current flexible learning students have highlighted in the questionnaire feedback the importance of community links and these Foundation Degrees offer an opportunity to engage directly with communities.

Further Education and Top-ups

The School of Early Childhood also has close links with Further Education providers locally, some of whom are part of the UWTSD family. This has allowed those studying Foundation Degrees within the sector locally to come to the School of Early Childhood and complete their level 6 study as part of the flexible learning route. The Foundation Degreeswill require the School of Early Childhood to plan carefully to ensure that top up level 6 opportunities exist (if the two year degree becomes an alternative to the three year programme), as the Foundation Degree can then still offer an important route for widening access and supportingstudents'ambitions to gain full degrees and access other training routes such as the PGCE.

New Areas for Widening Access

Since its inception in 2002 the profile of students applying for the flexible learning route has evolved away from the original entry requirements, with some applicants having worked in child care and education without a level 3 qualification but with extensive practicalexperience, or others with less than five years' experience of working in the sector. As a result the admissions and recruitment process has had to develop a flexible approach to selecting students which reflects the diversity of the childcare workforce.For example, during recent years it has been apparent that there has been an increase in the numbers of students who are younger but working full time in the child care sector and wish to pursue full time study while retaining their employment. Some of the fulltime traditional day time students who have attained work have changed (where appropriate) to the flexible route in order to study and work. The School of Early Childhood see this group as a target group for three year flexible learning provision in the future, especially

Developing flexible learning degree programmes for early childhood practitioners
using students' perceptions to inform programme development
and promote widening access.   *2014 Future Directions Wales Conference*

as these may be lost from higher education if they cannot work and study. This will be explored further during this academic year.

Despite the flexible learning courses widening access to undergraduate provision for those working in child care and education, the student cohort tends to reflect the early childhood workforce with the majority of students being women form white British backgrounds. The School of Early Childhood has undertaken projects to encourage BME groups to access its undergraduate provision (Tinney & Grist, 2007) however to date these have had no impact on the flexible route. This may reflect the local area where BME populations are traditionally less than the other more urban areas of Wales (Tinney & Grist, 2007), however Carmarthenshire does have significant pockets of some BME groups (such as those from Eastern Europe) and more should be done to engage with these communities.

The Early Childhood sector is aware that men are not well-represented within the workforce and thus the School also hopes to increase this group within the flexible route. There are encouraging signs in the traditional full time day time groups that the representation from BME groups and men have increased in recent years and the team will continue to monitor this situation across all programmes

Conclusion

The School of Early Childhood since 2002 has worked with students to develop flexible programmes to engage the childcare workforce and continue the widening access of this group into higher education as a means to support the provision of high quality child care and education in the early childhood sector. The programmes are also designed to support the learning and personal development of this important group of learners. The School have diversified provision in recent years in order to provide both full time and part time study in early childhood which is flexible and allows students to study and retain employment. The development of a new two year flexible learning route full time Early Childhood degree provides an innovative flexible route and the success of this pilot will be evaluated in order to measure its appropriateness for future flexible learning students.

Acknowledgments

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Developing flexible learning degree programmes for early childhood practitioners
using students' perceptions to inform programme development
and promote widening access.   *2014 Future Directions Wales Conference*

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