What are the voices from across the collaborative HE sector telling us?

Empirical research undertaken by the Association for the Collaborative Provision of Higher Education (ACP) into policy change on the collaborative HE sector from 2011-2013 gives insight into the individual and collective impact on practice and strategy for partners. Since the introduction of the Foundation Degree, collaborative provision between colleges and universities has had a profound impact on widening access for non-traditional learners. Building on HE research and literature (Garrod & Macfarlane, 2007; Parry, 2009; Parry et al., 2013; Parry et al., 2012; Scott, 2009; Trow, 2005) this research identifies four categories for recognition and the attention of policy makers, which provide the focus of this paper:

The Partnership environment. This is characterised by complexity and change, where positive practice is rooted in long standing, regional relationships. There lies some question as to the ability to sustain this model out of region and in the wake of some of the wider challenges within the collaborative HE sector.

Policy change. There is a particular need to address the ramifications of policy changes from a collaborative perspective. Many of the difficulties encountered by partners have been caused by the framing of policy and guidance around the needs of traditional university HE.

Strategy. The arguments for competition and student choice may provide an economic rationale for policy direction. However, much of the work on the ground to translate the policy initiatives into wider opportunities for HE rests on the history and instincts of collaborative providers.

Reputation and status. The experience and needs of partnership students may be removed from the traditional university campus based experience, but consideration of what such students should be able to expect from within these arrangements is paramount. Marginalising collaborative work to suggest high risk and low value perceptions will erode the willingness of institutions to participate in such work.