

Delivering Higher Education within Further Education in England, issues, tensions and opportunities.

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Abstract

There is an increasing blurring of boundaries between Higher Education (HE) and Further Education (FE), not only in delivery of programmes, but also in progression through programmes. The government has reiterated its commitment to widening participation and the removal of the divide between academic and vocational higher level skills. Further Education colleges have responded to the request to widen participation in HE by delivering courses closer to the client group, through flexible delivery methods and modes and co-operation with employers. However, there are tensions with this diversification of delivery point and methods, in terms of student support, staff workloads and research capacity as well as funding and investment.

Key words

Widening Participation
HE in FE

Word count 2550

There is an increasing blurring of boundaries between Higher Education (HE) and Further Education (FE), not only in delivery of programmes, but also in progression through programmes, with promotion of a seamless system of credits and progression in vocational areas (Gallacher 2006). Part of the rationale for the expansion of HE in FE is that of creating a “vocational ladder”

“to help overcome the divide between academic and vocational education, a new ladder of vocational progression has been proposed from the intermediate through to the higher levels of vocational learning, with a key focus on foundation degrees built on partnerships between higher education, further education and employers. Around the foundation degree and spanning the middle and upper rungs of the vocational ladder, there remain a variety of professional and technical qualifications” (Parry & Thompson 2002:78)

Key facts and Figures

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA 2009) shows the latest data for 2007/08, with approximately 4.93% of HE provision being delivered in colleges, 1.2% of all full time HE students are in FE and 12.07% of all part time students. This reflects the different mission and markets of HE and FE institutions.

2007/08 figures for HE provision in FECs

Total FE students	Full-time	Part-time
93690	14980	78710

2007/08 figures for HE provision in HEIs

Total UG students	Full-time	Part-time	United Kingdom	Other European Union	Non-European-Union
1804970	1232005	572965	1630660	69865	104445

Lord Mandelson, First Secretary of State, has also recently stated that distinctions between the academic route of higher education and vocational training (traditionally the preserve of FE) should be long gone (THES 15.10.2009 p 25). What does this mean for the future collaborative development and delivery of Higher Education?

Widening Participation

Dearing (1997) set out FE's role in widening participation in HE. Since the introduction of Foundation Degrees colleges have been seen as a major provider of vocational HE programmes. Now, with the potential that colleges may gain Foundation Degree awarding powers, meaning they no longer need to have an HEI to accredit and verify the programmes, the door seems open to further growth in HE in FE. This supports Greenwoods (2002) conclusion that a group of colleges which specialise in HE in FE delivery should be established. New centres of Higher Education, usually based on an FE college or group of colleges have recently been announced (HEFCE 2009). The government rhetoric implies that all of this growth should be employer focussed, employer led, and employer funded. While colleges may have expertise in responding to this market (Davies 2007), it is unclear if employers are willing to undertake their full role in this development.

The current caps on expansion of higher education, with universities threatened with penalties should they over recruit, has led to thousands of qualified students being unable to obtain HE places, working against the drive for widening participation. The sudden removal of Additional Student Numbers (ASNs) has further reduced the availability of funding for FE places, and universities are generally unable to plug the gap. Recent announcements of 2,000 ASNs nationally in shortage science and technology areas will do little to meet the aspirations of colleges and applicants in terms of supplying HE places (HEFCE 2009a). Greenwood (2002) urged greater regional planning between FE and HE institutions, stating

“it is not always evident that the market alone can deliver the combination of diversity of provision, widening participation and institutional stability needed to support the pace and desired direction of growth.” (p 2)

While this appears to be a sensible and strategic solution to the issues of resource and curriculum planning to meet market needs, currently there is little mechanism for discussion in this way between competing HEIs regionally, and where colleges work

with a range of HEIs this is unlikely to be feasible without government intervention, linked to funding. Economic pressures which have caused the rise in applications to HE at the same time as a cap on numbers may force this kind of regional discussion as resource becomes tighter and demands greater.

The merger in Scotland of the funding bodies for Further Education and Higher Education has created an agenda for closer co-operation and joint working in terms of progression and delivery of qualifications.

“designed to encourage cooperation between universities and colleges, to widen access to higher education and facilitate transfer from FE colleges to universities”. (Gallacher 2006:55)

Funding initiatives to promote joint working, sharing of information and student tracking have aided this integration in Scotland, but it is yet far from consistent. The expected report on higher education and skills in England and Wales may see similar mergers of funding bodies and agendas. The pressure from colleges for them to also be approved to deliver honours degree top up programmes as well as foundation degrees is also likely to increase if funding is available either directly or via Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

Potential Tensions

Davies (2007) identifies a range of tensions and issues when delivering HE in FE, while asserting that the quality of provision can be excellent there is often a lack of an “HE culture”. Specific issues cluster around

- Salary gaps
- Higher teaching hours
- Lack of support for scholarly activity
- Teaching in both systems with differing demands

These issues were also identified by Harwood and Harwood (2004), and do not seem to have moved on since then. Harwood and Harwood give especial weight to the teaching workload and its accompanying impact on scholarly activity. Davies claims that students want a distinct HE experience, even when being taught in an FE setting, this places additional pressure on facilities, and can create organisational

tensions, with one set of students (or staff) receiving a better deal than others. For Davies (2007), the most critical aspect of course quality is staff workloads, acknowledging that this tends to be addressed informally rather than as an organisational process which recognises the demands on staff. In Harwood & Harwood's (2004) study practice differed between colleges, and sometimes within colleges, as to how HE teaching hours were recognised. Some programme teams were given weighted hours when they were in HE areas, but others were not. Support for staff development to gain required qualifications and to attend staff development activities with partner HEIs is seen to be less problematic, although it may not be reflected in workloads. Harwood & Harwood (2004) cite examples of staff undertaking masters level programmes so that they have a qualification at least one level above the one they are teaching, but that this is done in their own time. It is however, seen as valuable in terms of their teaching and contact with research. Time and support to create a research culture to mirror that of HE remains a problematic area. This may be partly due to scale, if few staff are involved in HE it can be difficult to create a culture of research informed teaching and personal research. This may be again where working with partner HEIs could be of use.

Quality issues can be seen as an additional burden for FE staff. Some institutions seem to be able to reconcile the demands of two disparate QA systems, but generally the HE requirements are separate, (Davies 2007) and these may not be given the organisational support afforded to the core FE ones. An FE lecturer is quoted as saying

'We feel attacked from both sides in that FE managers are currently not creating an HE ethos and the university validation panels are saying that this isn't an ethos we trust'. (Harwood & Harwood 2004:162)

Pedagogical differences between FE and HE teaching are difficult to pin down exactly, and the move from NQF level 3 to level 4 may be seen by colleges to be unproblematic, and as creating opportunities for lecturers to be involved in more interesting and challenging teaching. However, students undertaking degree level programmes (including Foundation Degrees) need to be stretched and given learning challenges which extend their skills, knowledge and experience. This usually entails a more independent learning style and autonomy over their learning. Harwood & Harwood (2004) refer to this difficulty and highlight the tension for staff in FE who may wish to promote learning in a less structured way, but who have to live within the

constraints of the FE system, and the evaluation of their teaching undertaken within an OFSTED type framework. This may work against flexible and innovative teaching, to the detriment of the learners. In their survey Harwood & Harwood found some lecturers felt there was no need to differentiate between approaches in FE and HE, while others felt they were not empowered to make these changes, or that staff development for lecturers and managers was needed on how to teach HE programmes.

FE can excel in delivering HE, especially when it comes to responding swiftly to employer needs, and to reaching out to non-traditional learners. All learners are supported by a strong ethos of pastoral care, guidance and skills development (Davies 2007), that is an extension of the services offered to FE students. There may be a danger however, that colleges can create a dependency culture amongst their HE students, which may not always develop them fully as independent learners. This may be especially relevant for Foundation Degrees, which create progression routes to Honours programmes at an HEI. The HEI may not offer the level of personal support that was given in the college, expecting a Honours level student to have developed research and independent learning skills to shape their own learning experience. We may therefore be setting up more institutional barriers to learning through a mismatch of culture and expectations.

Blurring boundaries, creating tensions

In 2003/04 almost half of all part time HE students in Scotland studied in FE colleges. This highlights a traditional strength of FE provision, that it has been linked to employment and offered part time routes which allow for the continuation of employment throughout the study period. With the development of Foundation Degrees employment has been placed at the centre of some programmes, but universities may be less likely to be responsive to the needs of part time mature students, who need to fit their study around full time working. Those that have responded however, often in partnership with colleges, find that the students bring a wealth of work experience to the learning process that allows them to contextualise the learning in a way which enhances learning.

With the requirement of an identified progression route to an Honours degree from a Foundation Degree there has been further blurring of the boundaries between FE and HE, with the Foundation Degree delivered in colleges and the final stage in the

university. However, unless the universities can provide a similar part time supportive route students may not be able to progress to this level.

As Gallacher (2006) states, colleges have allowed for a widening of access to HE through local delivery. They facilitate participation by learners with non-traditional backgrounds and entry routes. Some participants may not have the kind of qualification portfolio that would allow them to access an Honours degree in a university, but can benefit from a more staged route to the same end through programmes delivered in colleges. However, this again raises the issues of student support and a possible mis-match with the HE ethos of developing autonomous learners, admissions staff must consider if applicants are ready to benefit from this level of programme. Those who do not have the standard entry requirements may well be capable of undertaking the programme, but may require pre-entry support to ensure that they are able to maximise the opportunity and not feel that they have constantly struggled because of gaps in the learning skills.

Greenwood (2002) highlights the lack of collaborative strategic planning at a local, regional and national level as a major block to the development of HE in FE, to deliver the increase in student numbers targeted by the government. She also reinforces the message that differences in salary, teaching loads and development time means that FE staff cannot always consistently deliver high quality HE programmes. Greenwood (2002) identifies the inadequacy of the evidence base for current policy in terms of increasing participation through FE delivery of HE. With colleges being able to access direct funding for HE programmes, the existing links between colleges and universities to deliver programmes may be further weakened. A cynical view may also be that it changes the relationship from one of colleges providing cheaper delivery of student numbers for universities, to one of autonomous colleges competing with universities for students.

Delivery of HE within FE can therefore be seen as a way of implementing the widening participation agenda, but there remain many tensions and areas of concern regarding staff workloads, conflicting quality assurance systems, student support and funding. Unless these can be resolved it is likely that the seamless delivery of a system which creates progression routes and quality opportunities for learners will not progress. That would be a betrayal of the commitment, energy and hard work that has been expended by people in FE and HE to develop a system which meets the needs of learners and employers.

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