

Degrees of difference – higher education in further education

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Introduction

The opportunity to study higher education (HE) in further education (FE) colleges has been increasing steadily (Parry, 2009). In Scotland 13.7 per cent of HE is delivered in FE colleges (Scottish Funding Council, 2011), making a significant, yet distinctive contribution to HE (Gallacher, 2006), compared to England where approximately 10 per cent of HE is delivered in FE colleges.

The role of FE colleges in delivering HE qualifications is an important strand of the Coalition Government's policy in the context of workforce development, raising skills levels and social mobility – widening access to HE. Speaking at the Association of College's conference, *HE in FE: New landscape, new opportunities?*, David Willetts (2011), the Minister of State for Universities and Science, recognised the ability of FE colleges to '... make an ever greater contribution to education, social mobility, and to growth'. Commenting on the forthcoming Education White Paper he stated that the objective was to create the conditions for a dynamic and responsive HE sector, with fewer barriers to providers, looking afresh at the anomalies created by the distinction between 'prescribed' and 'non-prescribed' HE (Willetts, 2011).

Trying to define HE in FE is no simple endeavour, since it is defined both by its source of funding, and by level within a framework for higher qualifications. In terms of level, HE qualifications refer to programmes and courses at level four and above. In terms of funding, HE in FE encompasses activity funded through the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), which is termed 'prescribed' HE, as well as activity which is funded through the Skills Funding Agency (SFA), 'non-

prescribed' HE. Despite these difficulties in defining provision there is, as Parry and Thompson (2002) note, an established tradition of HE in FE which stretches back over 30 years.

For many learners the decision to study HE at a college is a positive choice, with location being an important consideration in terms of convenience, cost and cultural familiarity of remaining within the local community. Whilst the ethos of the FE sector is to provide relevant and accessible educational opportunities for local communities, colleges face additional challenges when delivering HE in FE. As Jones (2006) notes, colleges need to create an HE culture and environment to differentiate provision and support for HE in FE learners.

In this chapter we draw on research undertaken in England at seven FE colleges delivering HE. The research was undertaken against a backdrop of public sector spending cuts, and a rapidly changing policy framework for HE funding and student fees. Whilst the Coalition Government is taking forward the recommendations of the independent review by Lord Browne on HE funding and student fees, the sector awaits the publication of the delayed HE White Paper. At the present time, funding and student fees are a major issue for HE, as institutions seek to make as smooth a transition as possible to the new funding settlements by summer 2012.

In the following sections we outline the methodological approach and research methods used to collect and analyse data, followed by a discussion of the findings from our small scale study.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was adopted in order to understand from the learners' perspective their experience of undertaking HE in an FE college. In this section we set out the methodological approach adopted for the study, the rationale for the sampling strategy, data collection methods and data analysis.

Sampling strategy

Whilst theoretical concerns may in part drive scholarly decisions, the realities of time and resources are often the key drivers in terms of

sampling decisions and strategies. As Kemper et al. (2003: 273) have noted: ‘Sampling issues are inherently practical’.

The research sites were selected by the funder on the basis of three criteria: firstly, the extent of their HE provision; secondly, geographical location; and thirdly, accessibility. In terms of the extent of HE provision, there was a spread of colleges with low (<500), medium (500-1500) and high (1500+) numbers of learners studying HE in FE. In terms of location, the aim was for a geographical spread with colleges in the north, east, south and west of England. Finally, colleges were selected on the basis of accessibility – their willingness and ability to participate in the study within the fieldwork time frame. Of the seven colleges selected to participate in the research, five colleges hosted two focus group meetings each whilst two colleges hosted one focus group each. Respondents were selected by the HE manager, HE coordinator or course leader at each of the colleges. A total of 92 learners participated in the study.

Data collection – focus group interviews

The rationale for convening focus groups is that they enable the researcher to explore the degree of consensus on a particular topic (Morgan and Krueger, 1993), and the interaction between respondents – listening and questioning – enables them to re-evaluate their own views and experiences (Kitzinger, 1994). We wanted not only to find out what issues were salient to respondents and why (Morgan, 1988) but also to understand the gap between intention and action or between what people say and what they do (Lankshear, 1993).

Demographic questionnaire

A simple self-completion questionnaire was used to capture basic demographic information from the learners participating in the study.

Data analysis

NVivo, a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) package, was used to help manage and organise the data generated from the 12 focus group interviews. Transcripts from the focus group interviews were coded using a ‘free node’ system, which means that all speech acts

from the transcriptions were assigned a code relating to one or more research themes. The free node style of coding ensures that key themes emerge, allowing as well for more spontaneous information to be included. This resulted in a comprehensive thematic matrix of information. Once coding was completed, the data were interrogated using NVivo to produce reports around key themes for analysis.

Ethical considerations and informed consent

An information sheet and consent form was sent in advance to each of the colleges for distribution to the learners participating in the study. At the beginning of each meeting learners were briefed by the focus group moderator and reminded that: their participation was voluntary; they were entitled to refuse to answer particular questions; they should respect the confidentiality of fellow participants; and they could withdraw from the focus group at any time.

Findings

In this section we set out our findings from analysing the data from the 12 focus groups. We have organised our findings based on the themes: teaching and learning, infrastructure, and symbolic aspects of HE identified by Weatherald and Moseley (2003) and developed by Jones (2006) who adds a fourth theme, student engagement, as important in creating an HE ethos or culture in FE. We preface this section with a brief description of the learners' background and the importance of place and community.

Learners' background

Of the 92 learners who participated in the study, 61 per cent were female and 39 per cent were male; in terms of age, 50 per cent were aged 20-29; 55 per cent were studying full-time and 45 per cent were studying part-time. However, of the part-time learners, 14 per cent attended college on a block release basis, a common mode of attendance for employer-sponsored HE in FE students. In terms of ethnicity, 84 per cent identified themselves as White, 7 per cent as Asian, 4 per cent as Black, 2 per cent as from other ethnic groups and 3 per cent did not respond. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) (2011) figures for

2009/10 on HE for UK domiciled learners of all undergraduate levels, 82 per cent are White. While these figures do not consider HE in FE learners, the ethnic mix of the research participants is broadly in line with the national HE picture. A significant minority, 26 per cent, had previous HE experience (at both degree and foundation degree level). Due to the lack of available data for HE in FE participation and particularly demographic data we are unsure if this is an indicative picture of HE in FE learners, or if it is a result of selection bias.

The importance of place and community

Exploring why learners chose to undertake an HE course in an FE college revealed the complexity of learners' lives and how this impacted on their decision making process. Whilst learners cited a number of reasons for their choice of course and college, the most important factor was the opportunity to study locally in a community where they felt comfortable. Studying locally also reduces travel time and costs, important considerations for learners balancing work and family commitments with their studies.

Easy to get here. I am a single parent so...it was easy – the times suited me; there's a lot of single parents on the course so...it's tailor made

Where employer-sponsored learners did have a choice of where to study, location – proximity to work or home – became even more important. As one employer-sponsored learner commented:

Well, we have one day off a week to come to uni; it's important that we don't take too long out to travel.

For others, psychologically the place of learning is important because they see people like themselves there. Some learners expressed discomfort with university as being '...not for the likes of us'.

Teaching and learning

We asked learners to tell us about teaching and learning at their college, focusing primarily on access to teaching staff but also exploring pedagogy, learning styles and the tutorial system.

Many of the focus group participants expressed a preference for practice over theory and for learning through practice. For some, the quality of teaching varied and access to teaching staff was challenging; however, the majority of learners were relatively satisfied with the quality of teaching and found teaching staff to be supportive.

Teaching staff

In discussing the quality and effectiveness of teaching staff, learners in all of the focus groups were at pains to point out that the quality of teaching varied, with some of their teachers perceived as below average, whilst others were identified as enthusiastic and expert with up to date industry knowledge.

Some tutors are enthusiastic about what they do, and help you and really care. Others just come here, get paid for it, then leave. They don't really care about the students.

The teachers are really supportive.

Yet within the same focus group a learner on a different course within the same faculty reported:

We had a recent assignment and the tutor didn't know how to do it and couldn't explain it and then it dropped our grades.

Learners also recognised that whilst some of their lecturers were knowledgeable and had up to date industry experience they lacked the ability to deliver this effectively.

...he wasn't a teacher basically – he knew his stuff but I think there's a couple of lecturers who have been brought in because they know their stuff, but they can't teach.

They pointed to the accessibility of the teaching staff, and the promptness of replies to their e-mails and other enquiries. Most learners were comfortable asking questions in class, and often teachers would stay back after class to answer questions.

We're dead practical learners on our course – the majority of the course offers that, for you to be able to go away and try and if there's a problem the tutor is there to say...well you say 'I want to do this but I have no idea how to do it' – so you, kind of like, give yourself an idea and then they push that learning so that you are competent.

Not all comments were so positive, reflecting the mixed nature of access to teachers between colleges and subject areas.

Other comments about teaching staff pointed out that many were still practicing in their fields, alongside their teaching duties. This was seen to be of benefit to the learners, as they were receiving practical and up-to-date, industry standard information from the teaching staff.

Tutors and tutorials

The vast majority of learners that we spoke with said that their tutors were extremely helpful. This included offering pre-entry advice and guidance, as well as on-course support. Whilst there appears to be a variety of practice, not only between but also within colleges, in terms of (one-to-one) tutorial arrangements, most learners commented that they were able to access their tutors outside of class if necessary.

Overall, learners were unclear as to whether a tutorial system operated within their college, '...What tutorial system?', and if it did, what they could expect from their tutor in terms of support.

I've never had a tutorial – I don't even know what one was – so I just tend to come to college, go to the lectures and go back home and work on it on my own.

I put in a request for a tutorial on 10th February and...I've been offered a tutorial date of 21st March. And I thought she'd put the wrong date.

A few learners were positive about the tutorial system at their college.

...it's pretty flexible in my experience; you just contact them and they'll say 'come and see me tomorrow afternoon' – or if they're in you just go and see them.

Where learners found it difficult to access their assigned personal tutor most overcame this by seeking advice and guidance from other members of teaching staff.

We haven't seen our tutor this year and in the third year it is the most important year. But I'm lucky I've had other lecturers... [who] have just been really kind. But as a personal tutor he's just been really nonexistent.

Class sizes

When talking about why they chose to study at college, learners cited smaller class size, compared to university, as an important factor.

So the whole college appeals to me because there's a relationship between you and your tutor. So I'd probably go for college because it's more intimate...than at a university.

Those who had experienced HE at a higher education institution (HEI) in particular found small class sizes to be beneficial, and even learners who had no HEI experience were uncomfortable at the thought of attending lectures with hundreds of other students.

I needed that more-of-a-class, hands-on setting; because of being out of education I wanted to feel like I was part of a class rather than turn up to a lecture where there's 40 or 50 people there and just being a number....

Infrastructure – facilities and services

In this section we report on learners' views of their college's infrastructure, the physical facilities and services supporting HE in FE provision. A number of factors including: tradition and mission; geographical location and estates; extent of HE provision; and budgets will influence not only the level of provision but the degree to which it is integrated or separated within individual colleges.

Most learners were satisfied with the general facilities offered and for some, facilities were an important reason for choosing FE college over university.

I come here because of the facilities.

The equipment at university is terrible. It's much better here.

Information technology facilities and virtual learning environments

On the whole learners were generally satisfied with the information technology (IT) facilities offered by their college. Where concerns were raised they related to access to computers as well as limited or restricted access to specialist software or Internet sites. Whilst all learners were aware of their college's virtual learning environment (VLE), some reported that the areas of the VLE they accessed were not updated regularly.

...well, there's no point if they're never updated – I tried to find some coursework one day and it was the last years' coursework still up there.

All I've used it for is when the exams are on and for past papers – even then if you need a timetable or things for college – you try to find it on there – but that's not on there.

However, issues around take-up of e-learning resources are certainly not limited to FE colleges, with similar issues being reported in HEIs where, whilst there is high level of provision of e-learning resources (particularly VLEs), the use of these resources is uneven, and oftentimes dependent on individual teaching staff who act as e-learning champions for their subject areas (Berzins and Hudson, 2011).

Library and information services

Library and information services were generally very well regarded by learners in terms of access to and availability of relevant resources and helpful, well informed staff. While there were some issues around noise and access, comments about college libraries were generally very positive.

I had a really good experience this week. I popped in, it must have been 8:00pm, and I saw a librarian about a specific issue and she took me right to the section; she had set up a system for the library and took me through it all and went through everything. She knew it all off the top of her head.

Facilities at the partner higher education institution

Whilst many of the learners were aware that they could access the facilities, such as the library, of the partner HEI validating their course, very few did so since they were perceived to be too far away and in the case of library resources the college's provision met their needs.

No, we don't need to because what the college offers is good enough....

A recurring theme across all of the focus groups was the desire for a designated HE area – a quiet place to study away from the bustling college environment and boisterous younger learners.

Sometimes it's quite discouraging when you're surrounded by a lot of FE students just messing around – it just doesn't feel professional.

It's like being in a sixth form common room.

Only one college in our sample had a dedicated HE area, although others were at various stages of developing such facilities.

Higher education ethos

Whilst learners spoke about the importance of services, facilities and equipment, some of which they felt was far superior to that offered at the local HEI, they also spoke about the importance of these services and facilities in terms of demarcation, differentiation and prioritisation.

Some expressed this tentatively, 'I don't want to sound snobby...but...?', and then proceeded to explain why they thought there should be separate or differentiated facilities or a higher priority for usage for HE learners.

Sometimes it's quite discouraging when you're surrounded by a lot of FE students just messing around – it just doesn't feel professional.

It is not uncommon to hear postgraduate learners at HEIs express the same concerns in relation to their own institution and undergraduate students.

In exploring respondents' experience at college the apparent absence of an adequate induction emerged as an important concern. Some learners reported that they did not have a formal induction and those that did felt that it was less than satisfactory.

...we got our cards from reception and found someone at the gate to tell us what room we were in – and then we got a double sided A4 bit of paper – and that was our induction.

I took a whole day off work, thinking that it would be important....
My induction was basically enrolment.

These concerns about induction are not exclusive to FE colleges in general or to HE in FE students in particular, but are shared by students and staff in HEIs. As Crooks and Parmar (2006: 187) note: 'It is clear that the universities must offer a more student-focused induction experience if students are to take seriously what is arguably one of the most important aspects of their first academic year'.

Learner identity

The limited duration of the focus group meetings enabled us only to explore briefly with respondents how they identified themselves as learners – whether they saw themselves as 'university' or 'FE college' students – and how they represented themselves to others. Whilst individual responses varied, the majority said, 'I am at college', but a significant minority reported telling friends and family that they are 'at uni' or 'studying a degree'.

Further prompting and probing around this question provoked interesting conversations about how studying at a college was perceived as being

‘second rate’ by those who were outside this system. Most of the learners said that they did not care about this misunderstanding and were very satisfied overall with their college course. Indeed many found this attitude amusing and pointed to the fact that they felt they were getting a much better deal than students at HEIs – with smaller class sizes, more attentive teaching staff and lower overall costs.

Student engagement – listening to learners

Again the limited duration of the focus group meetings prevented exploring student engagement with all groups, but where we did, learners were able to articulate the mechanisms that their course and college used to engage with them. These included the National Student Survey, course and module feedback questionnaires, student parliament and HE forums. Those learners who had been most actively engaged, participating in an HE forum or serving as an HE governor, expressed dissatisfaction and frustration:

It’s what I call a box ticking exercise....

Basically we all get together and we say what’s going on. They say ‘ok’ and then do nothing about it.

On further exploration, prompting and probing, this concern was brought on by a lack of clarity around planned actions and improvements resulting from student feedback, i.e. simply not closing the feedback loop. The variation of practice within institutions, highlighted by Little et al. (2009), was confirmed by focus group participants within the same institution, some of whom had completed module evaluation and others whose modules had not been evaluated.

Conclusions

Through the focus group sessions, we found that the research participants’ demographics in terms of ethnicity, age and gender are broadly representative of the national HE picture, and therefore that their comments can be seen as indicative of the general picture of HE in FE

provision. It must be noted, however, that qualitative data are not intended to be generalisable, rather that it gives fine grain detail to the subject under investigation. With this in mind, the learners' comments gave us a rich data set with which to explore the themes as reported.

The richness that an increasingly diverse student body in FE and HE brings also highlights the different attitudes and multiple motivations towards study at HE level, which will need to be taken into account when devising mechanisms with which to engage students. The busy lives that learners lead highlighted by many of our respondents, who need to study at a college close to home and work because of their domestic and work commitments, also need to be recognised.

The findings show that overall there is a strong case to be made around the benefits of studying HE in an FE setting, in particular because of: small class sizes that enable more one-on-one time with teaching staff; the location of FE colleges and the importance of local HE provision; the value for money that the courses often represent; and in some cases, better facilities and industry relevant information. Overwhelmingly, when asked about learning preferences, the learners in the focus groups told us that they were very practical learners, and that their colleges delivered well in this style of teaching and learning.

Where there were criticisms of the course content, college facilities such as lack of IT, questionable teaching quality, lack of information around tutorial systems (or indeed lack of systems here) or having to share college resources with noisy, younger learners, the researchers felt that most of these negatives were not FE specific, but that these problems were found in all educational institutions, including schools and HEIs. Perhaps the most serious concern raised by the learners that we spoke with was the lack of induction. This issue was raised by those in a wide variety of courses, subject areas and colleges. The resolution of the induction problem would be of great benefit to HE in FE learners, and would provide these learners with a sound grounding in their course information. Potentially this could also address other concerns, such as outlining the tutorial system and assessment mechanisms, which would make the HE in FE offer even stronger.

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