



M O N O G R A P H

HIGHER EDUCATION IN FURTHER EDUCATION: LEADING THE CHALLENGE

John Widdowson and Madeleine King

ABOUT FETL

The Further Education Trust for Leadership's vision is of a further education sector that is valued and respected for:

- Innovating constantly to meet the needs of learners, communities and employers;
- Preparing for the long term as well as delivering in the short term; and
- Sharing fresh ideas generously and informing practice with knowledge.

M O N O G R A P H

FETL monographs are short, forward-looking treatments of subjects key to the leadership of thinking in further education and skills. Written at the invitation of the Trust, they aim to influence leadership in and of the sector, taking its present needs and concerns as their starting point and looking deeply into the experience of colleagues in order to devise scripts for the future. As with all FETL's work, the intention is not to offer definitive solutions but to engage readers in further thought and debate about issues crucial to the development of FE and skills in the UK, often drawing on ideas from other sectors and disciplines. Each monograph concludes with a number of key ways ahead for the sector.

Website: www.fetl.org.uk

Email: enquiries@fetl.org.uk

 @FETforL

MIXED ECONOMY GROUP

The Mixed Economy Group (MEG) of colleges represents those further education colleges which have a significant, established, strategic and developmental role in the provision of higher education.

Member colleges focus on the complementary aims of widening participation among groups and individuals currently under-represented in higher education and working with employers to ensure that higher-level skills are developed and recognised in the workplace.

www.mixedeconomygroup.co.uk

John Widdowson CBE. A lawyer by training, John is the Principal of New College Durham, one of the first English colleges to be granted Foundation Degree Awarding Powers by the Privy Council. He is the current Chair of the HE Portfolio Group within the Association of Colleges and has been Chair of the Mixed Economy Group of colleges for many years. He has published papers and articles on a range of education subjects and spoken regularly at national and international conferences. He has a particular interest in the development of college-based HE to provide alternatives to traditional approaches to higher education.

Madeleine King is the Research and International Officer for the Mixed Economy Group of FE colleges in England. A policy maker by background, having worked in Local Education Authorities, the Further Education Funding Council and the Association of Colleges, she has a specialist interest in HE in FE matters. She led on HE policy development within the Learning and Skills Council prior to moving on to independent research and consultancy in the same sector. She has published a range of papers and articles on matters relating to college-based HE.



CONTENTS

- 4** _ Foreword
- 7** _ Introduction
- 10** _ Chapter 1: What is 'HE in FE'?
- 17** _ Chapter 2: Developing an HE strategy
- 22** _ Chapter 3: University partnerships, qualifications and awarding powers
- 30** _ Chapter 4: Systems and structures
- 36** _ Chapter 5: The student experience
- 43** _ Chapter 6: Leading HE in FE
- 47** _ Chapter 7: Navigating policies and expectations
- 52** _ Chapter 8: Conclusion

FOREWORD

Neil Bates FCGI

With the future shape of tertiary education in the UK up for debate and a substantial expansion of higher education in colleges expected to play an important role in the government's post-18 funding review, this monograph could not be more relevant to the challenges the sector now faces.

If, as is widely anticipated, higher education becomes much more central to the mission of further education colleges in England, we will, as a sector, need to think much harder about the sorts of skills leaders and governors will require to adapt and flourish in what could, in some respects, be a very different world.

The thought-provoking and comprehensive overview this publication offers in support of new thinking about the skills we will need, and the potential contribution of further education institutes both to the economic prosperity of the nation and to the well-being and success of their local communities, make it essential reading for sector leaders.

The renewed attention to HE in FE comes during a period of substantial reform, which has focused particularly on the need for higher technical skills. The Sainsbury review and the subsequent post-16 skills plan both indicated a willingness to think differently and more expansively about technical education, and there is clear impetus for this from Brexit and Britain's seemingly intractable productivity puzzle.

The review of technical professional education will be crucial if the government is to achieve the ambition of all recent skills strategies and reforms – to establish a world-class skills system capable of closing the productivity gap and matching our international competitors – while also preparing us for a post-Brexit world in which we will rely much more on our own homegrown talent.

There is a lot to do. The UK is ranked sixteenth out of 20 OECD countries for intermediate skills at a time when the European Union forecasts that two-thirds of overall employment growth will come from technicians and associate professionals. Worryingly, at the very time that we need them most, there has been a decline in the overall number of undergraduates within FE and a very substantial fall in the number of part-time students who combine study with work.

I was always taught that you should never waste a crisis. Securing our successful emergence from this low point in participation represents a significant opportunity for further education colleges to fill the 'polytechnic-type hole' created by the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. Thirty-Five of our locally based polytechnics became universities. However, in too many cases, new freedoms in FE and HE led institutions to chase high-yield, full-time students in preference to the more challenging delivery models required to support people in work and in the community.

FE providers now have an opportunity to fulfil the sector's dual mandate to meet the needs of the community and lead a renaissance in higher-level technical skills, described by Ron Dearing in his 1997 report as 'their special mission'. The FE sector is uniquely placed to do this work. We already know that, despite the low numbers of learners studying undergraduate programmes in FE, a disproportionate number come from disadvantaged backgrounds. They are also much more likely to be from the local community. This makes part-time HE, delivered flexibly to meet the needs of the local economy and community, a potentially powerful contributor to social mobility.

The authors make a clear and compelling case for change and outline, persuasively, the opportunity this presents for FE and skills providers. They also describe the challenges and complexities involved in entering any new market, but in particular higher education. Such a move demands careful thought and planning and the authors skilfully describe the steps that need to be taken to ensure successful and sustainable transition into HE.

The monograph makes an important contribution to current debate about skills and to thinking about the future of FE. It gives a persuasive insight into how leaders might think about HE and its relationship with FE. In doing so, it also contributes to FETL's mission.

We may be witnessing a further blurring of the boundaries between FE and HE, as our skills system becomes more responsive to what employers need and what students want for their money. In this new world, demand is driven not by the government but by the paying customer and leaders will do well to remember that when it comes to thinking about institutional mission, their offer and the fees they charge.

Neil Bates

Neil Bates is Associate Director for Technical Education Reforms and T Levels at the Education and Training Foundation and is one of the UK's leading figures in the field of technical education. He was until recently Principal and Chief Executive of Prospects College of Advanced Technology (PROCAT), the first new further education college to be incorporated in England after the 1992 Education Act. In 2013, he was honoured for his outstanding achievements through the award of a Fellowship of the City & Guilds London Institute and, in 2017, he was awarded the AELP outstanding contribution award.

INTRODUCTION

Further education colleges (FECs) have delivered courses of higher education (HE) for decades. However, until the reforms of recent years, offering HE was not seen as central to the mission of many colleges. A relatively small number offered the bulk of what has come to be known as 'HE in FE' or 'CBHE' (college-based higher education). These colleges played a small but significant role in the HE landscape, with particular focus on areas such as higher technical skills, widening participation and part-time provision. Changes in government policy in recent years have resulted in many more colleges including HE in their curriculum offer. In addition, research undertaken by both the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)¹ and the UK Commission for Education and Skills (UKCES)² has confirmed the potential for colleges to take a leading role in providing higher-level vocational courses, especially at Level 5, in order to fill a 'polytechnic-sized hole' in provision. Although most of the college HE offer is still concentrated in around 40 colleges, the removal of student number restrictions for all providers and a desire on the part of successive governments to increase the diversity and competitive nature of the HE landscape in general has resulted in over 200 FECs now offering HE qualifications.³ This is in addition to the growth of 'alternative providers' found in the private sector. Much college provision continues to focus on higher technical skills, a term used to cover a suite of qualifications across levels 4 and 5, including Higher National Certificates and Diplomas, foundation degrees and a range of NVQs at Level 4 and above.

While confidence in colleges has grown, against a background of an increasingly marketised approach to HE on the part of government, little attention has been paid to the skills needs of college leaders. For many senior FEC staff, managing HE has not figured significantly in their career development. College mergers as a result of the area-based

¹ Musset, P. and Field, S. 2013. *A Skills beyond School Review of England: OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training*. Paris, OECD Publishing.

² UKCES. 2014. *Growth through people*. London, UKCES.

³ Association of Colleges (AoC). 2017. *College Key Facts, 2016/17*. London, AoC.

review programme will create larger institutions, many of which will find themselves significant providers of HE as a consequence. Does leading and managing CBHE in the current complex and competitive environment require a distinctive set of skills, compared with those needed to manage FE provision alone?

The leadership of CBHE has never been thoroughly examined or researched. Universities have a long history of developing leaders for their institutions. The work of the Higher Education Academy⁴ and the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education⁵ established clear career development pathways and identified a body of skills and knowledge considered essential for university-based HE delivery. No parallel work has been undertaken for CBHE. As a consequence there has been a lack of thinking about the place of HE in the FE landscape.

As the amount of HE taught in colleges looks set to rise, a number of key questions must be addressed by college leaders. These include:

- Can HE be delivered within existing college structures designed for FE?
- How can different approaches to quality assurance (Ofsted/Quality Assurance Agency) be incorporated within the same institution?
- Are there additional demands made of teachers and leaders in terms of scholarship and research?
- How will colleges deal with a changing pattern of validation, as more colleges achieve validating powers?
- What impact will this have on relationships with partner universities?
- What are the implications for college governors and college governance?

⁴ For example, the HEA's current Academic Leadership Programme.

⁵ For example, the LFHE's Top Management Programme

HE in FE, therefore, represents a fast-changing environment, needing clear strategic leadership and effective operational approaches. A range of issues faces leaders in FECs when they undertake the process of designing, delivering and managing programmes of HE. This document brings together much of the current thinking on these essential areas, giving senior college leaders a framework and context within which to make the decisions which will affect the future of their colleges – and the shape and nature of this important element of our education system.

CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS 'HE IN FE'?

We value exceptionally highly the contribution that FE providers make to the HE sector... There are 159,000 HE students in FE colleges, which do a terrific job.

Jo Johnson MP, Minister of State for Universities,
Science, Research and Innovation, 2016

1. Background

Despite its long history, college-based higher education (CBHE) has usually been seen as peripheral to the main mission of the FE college, often existing more by accident than design. Higher-level provision sometimes developed as a result of 'academic drift', whereby senior leaders and governors judged the value of the institution by the highest level of work it provided rather than on its response to local needs (often at the expense of lower-level provision). HE can also be developed as a response to a need from local students to acquire a 'licence to practice'. In the past, many professions, such as social work or nursing, did not demand graduate or equivalent level qualifications but these are now required. Colleges offering these courses at non-graduate level have responded by upgrading them to a recognised higher qualification. In other words, the development of CBHE has often been haphazard, poorly planned and reactive, both nationally and at local level.

Nevertheless, colleges have continued to play a small but important role in the development of higher technical skills. A key moment in the history of CBHE was the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education in 1997, often referred to as the Dearing Report.⁶ Lord Dearing devoted several paragraphs of his report specifically to the role of FE colleges in the provision of HE. He concluded that FE colleges were

⁶ National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education. 1997. *Higher Education in the learning society*. London, HMSO.

the best vehicle for the provision of sub-degree qualifications, referring to this as their 'special mission', and recommended immediate growth in this level of provision. However, no consistent or coherent policy for dual-sector further and higher education emerged post-Dearing. Any policymaking for HE in FE colleges was done by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) rather than the Learning and Skills Council (the FE funding body at that time). Mainstream HE cultural norms and HEFCE continue to determine how the FE sector behaves in respect of the delivery of foundation and bachelor degrees.

In 2002, the Learning and Skills Development Agency commissioned the report, *Closer by degrees*.⁷ Published at a time of great change for HE, the document offered a valuable historical study of the issues facing HE in FE. Many of its observations still apply today. Since the formation of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2010, a steady stream of policy documents have highlighted the importance of higher technical skills.

2. What is higher education?

Under previous funding arrangements, 'higher education' has taken two forms, namely prescribed and non-prescribed HE (PHE and NPHE).

Higher National Certificates and Diplomas (HNCs and HNDs), foundation, bachelor and postgraduate degrees are all prescribed HE qualifications. HNCs and HNDs are awards offered by Pearson Edexcel in England but can be awarded under licence by universities and colleges. With this exception, only institutions with degree-awarding powers can validate and deliver prescribed HE. Funding is from student fees, paid either directly via the Student Loans Company or indirectly through a franchise arrangement with a partner university (due to former funding arrangements, this is often referred to as 'HEFCE-funded HE', although that body no longer funds most undergraduate provision).

More details of the funding process are given in *Chapter 4*.

⁷ Parry, G. and Thompson, A. 2002. *Closer by degrees*. London, LSDA

Non-prescribed HE covers qualifications provided by organisations such as Edexcel and City and Guilds, professional bodies such as CILEX and CIMA, and all higher-level National Vocational Qualifications. It is a different style of HE, being largely vocational and part-time (PT), with different quality assurance requirements. Many colleges deliver a mixture of both types of HE. Funding streams for NPHE are highly varied, with the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) meeting some, but not all, qualification costs in full, employers paying all or some of their employees' training fees and many individuals meeting their own fees for courses, often on a full-cost basis.

3. The scale of HE in FE

Recent reforms, including the removal of the cap on full-time (FT) student recruitment, have led to an increase in the number of colleges offering HE. In March 2017, 241 colleges offered higher qualifications,⁸ many with little, if any, prior experience of working at this level. From a total of 1,375,000 undergraduate students, about 150,000 receive their HE in FE colleges. Some colleges, such as Blackpool and the Fylde, Newcastle College and Bradford College, have over 2,000 full-time equivalent (FTE) HE students following prescribed HE courses. In others, the numbers of HE students are small. In general, those with greatest volumes of students are more experienced in HE matters and have thus had time to establish clear systems for HE data, quality and funding procedures. Sixty-two of the 241 colleges have at least 500 FTE HE students; at the other end of the scale, 15 have fewer than 100 students. Three-quarters of students undertaking HE in FE are following courses below first degree level, such as foundation degrees, HNCs and HNDs.⁹

In a report analysing the economic impact of CBHE,¹⁰ commissioned by the Education and Training Foundation, RCU concluded that in 2015/16, a total of 151,360 students were pursuing a course of HE in an FE college. Using Individual Learning Record (ILR) and Higher Education

⁸ HEFCE. 2017. *Higher Education in England 2017: Key Facts*. Bristol, HEFCE.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ RCU. 2017. *College Based Higher Education*. RCU and ETF.

Statistics Agency (HESA) data, RCU was able to apportion this number as follows:

18,780 (12%)	Education and Skills Funding Agency
34,349 (23%)	Full-cost professional courses
75,590 (50%)	HEFCE directly funded
23,643 (16%)	HEFCE indirectly funded

Source: ILR 2015/16 and HESA student records 2015/16

4. The nature of HE in FE

HE in FE has a number of distinctive characteristics. It is usually technical or vocational in nature, often providing a clear progression pathway for FE students in cognate disciplines. Colleges have a key role to play in the delivery of 'sub-degree' higher-level qualifications, principally foundation degrees and Higher Nationals. Indeed, many, if not most, universities have concentrated on three-year honours degrees to Level 6, at the expense of these other qualifications. As a result, colleges have become the prime deliverers of such provision. Colleges teach 86 per cent of foundation degrees, making up 58 per cent of the total foundation degree offer, and dominate the market for Higher National awards, offering 85 per cent of HNCs (usually studied part-time) and 82 per cent of HNDs.¹¹ Students are attracted to study at their local college as the provision is accessible and usually allows them to continue with PT employment and familiar social networks. The average distance from home to college is 17 miles, compared to 52 for those studying at university.¹² As noted by HEFCE, colleges can be effective providers in 'HE cold spots', i.e. in geographical areas where universities find it difficult to deliver, or, in another interpretation of the term, where the regional HE institution does not meet local demand. The role played by FECs in widening participation has been acknowledged by HEFCE,¹³ which also recognises the importance of the HE in FE offer to mature students. CBHE students are on average older than their university counterparts, with a relatively high proportion

¹¹ AoC. 2018. *College Key Facts 2017/18*. London, AoC.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ HEFCE. 2016. *Higher education indicators for further education colleges*. Bristol, HEFCE

studying PT. Many colleges also offer courses of NPHE. Frequently overlooked as part of the wider HE offer, these courses are often attractive alternative routes for CBHE learners. They can lead to valued licences to practice, as well as offering work-based qualifications for those in employment.

Colleges would also claim that their students benefit from longer contact hours and smaller group sizes. Along with greater access to tutors, both of these features attract learners who, despite having the ability to succeed in HE, may need more support to deal with new academic challenges.¹⁴

5. Government reforms and expectations

For many years, it has been government policy to encourage growth in the rate of participation in HE, particularly among school leavers choosing to study for a FT honours degree. Although widening participation among those from backgrounds or communities with historically low levels of participation remains a government priority, the gap in participation remains. Despite numerous policies to widen participation, the number of PT HE students has declined markedly, by around 60 per cent since 2010/11.¹⁵ Two-thirds of all PT students are following foundation degree, HNC and HND courses, qualifications delivered mainly in FE colleges. While universities continue to focus on their traditional market of FT, fee-paying students, CBHE has always been more evenly spread across FT and PT provision. Any further reduction in PT numbers could potentially have a significant impact on the viability of some college provision.

The advantages of the FE college approach to HE have been recognised in two recent government documents. In March 2015, the coalition government published a consultation on *A dual mandate for adult vocational education*.¹⁶ This described a distinctive role for colleges in providing higher-level professional and technical skills, highlighted as

¹⁴ Mixed Economy Group (MEG). 2013. *Higher Viewpoints*. MEG.

¹⁵ HEFCE. 2017. *Higher Education in England 2017 Key Facts*. Bristol, HEFCE.

¹⁶ Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015

part of a 10-year vision which would give parity of esteem to both academic and vocational routes. The following government chose not to proceed with this initiative; however, the current Conservative administration has announced, as part of its Skills Plan, the creation of 'institutes of technology'.¹⁷ The implications for colleges of the creation of these new institutes will be considered later: how these new institutions will fit in the HE system has yet to be demonstrated. A recent consultation on higher-level skills in relation to the proposed progression route from 'T' levels to levels 4 and 5 has also been announced: CBHE providers have been specifically encouraged to contribute to this.¹⁸

Reforms to HE validating powers under the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 will add further dimensions to what is an increasingly complex picture. Innovative pathways such as Higher and Degree Apprenticeships will present new opportunities but, potentially, make the task of navigating the range of providers more difficult. These apprenticeships will place a renewed emphasis on the importance of access to impartial careers information, advice and guidance.

Against this background of increasing diversity and growth and an apparently benign policy environment, it is perhaps surprising that the number of students studying HE in FE has declined slightly.¹⁹ This could be partly explained by the demographic decline in the number of school leavers aged 18, coupled with increased competition from universities, but the ageing workforce would suggest that options for growth existed, which would counteract this. The market for FT students has become increasingly competitive, despite the fact that most HEIs have set fees at or near the maximum permissible. In some cases, HE institutions make use of strategies such as unconditional offers to achieve recruitment targets. In response, some colleges have set lower fees, although this does not appear to have had a measurable impact on student enrolment.

¹⁷ Department for Education. 2017. *Institutes of Technology Prospectus*. London, HMSO.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ HEFCE. 2016. *Higher Education in Further Education Student Survey, 2015/16*. Bristol, HEFCE.

This study will bring together much of the current thinking in these essential areas. It will consider the implications of a fast-changing landscape for college leaders and the communities they serve, giving senior leaders a framework and context in which to make decisions that will affect the future of their colleges and how they can prosper in a more diverse and competitive environment

CHAPTER 2

DEVELOPING AN HE STRATEGY

Although a number of teachers were keen to expand into HE, we decided that our partnership with the university in our city was strong and that there was no need to compete or duplicate provision. Instead, we have been able to focus on our core FE work.

FE college vice-principal

For even the largest providers of HE in FE, the HE offer forms a relatively small proportion of the overall curriculum. The impact of this simple fact increases proportionately as the volume of HE decreases within each of the 241 colleges offering HE. In the current competitive environment, the existence of a sound rationale for a suite of HE courses is of increasing importance.

The starting point for most college leaders will be the fundamental question: Why should this college offer higher education at all? A variety of rationales may emerge, some with greater merit than others. In some cases, it is an accident of history: several colleges were formed as a result of mergers which included providers of HE such as teacher training colleges or mono-technic institutions in areas as diverse as mining or art and design. In other cases, changes in the HE policy environment enabled new entrants to the existing college HE market. Alternatively, colleges respond to demand when their FE students are either unable to secure places at local universities or those universities fail to provide direct progression pathways, particularly for vocational learners at Level 3. In many cases, this can be a powerful driver for enlarging the college HE offer. In others, new leaders may find themselves dealing with legacy HE provision that may or may not complement their current strategic plans.

Gaps can also exist in specific disciplines or subject areas. In an attempt to present a more traditional view of the HE curriculum,

some universities have sought to offer degree courses linked to a research agenda rather than to local skills needs. Direct progression pathways from thriving FE courses in areas such as personal and service industries can sometimes be hard to find as universities do not offer direct progression in related subjects (and many subjects which are of interest to CBHE students – especially PT students – are in occupations which didn't exist when the oldest universities were founded). This clearly represents an opportunity for colleges.

The decline in PT HE provision over the last seven years also presents opportunities, enabling colleges to build on the history they have of working with employers and offering this more focused form of higher study.

The nature of the college locality is important.²⁰ For example, particular groups may find travel to study difficult, for cultural or other reasons. It is notable that, on average, colleges recruit 80 per cent of their HE students from the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) area, compared to just 36 per cent for universities, a figure largely unchanged over the last three years.²¹ This suggests that colleges have the potential to become anchor institutions within their local communities.

Thus, in developing an HE strategy, colleges have a number of issues to consider. First, there should be an honest and realistic appraisal of the college's curriculum strengths. Successful HE provision is unlikely to be built on insecure FE foundations. This must be accompanied by a review of staffing capabilities to ensure that the college has teachers with the appropriate qualifications and experience to deliver at higher level. In many cases, this will mean teachers with postgraduate or professional qualifications in relevant disciplines. Where such people are not currently employed by the college, steps will have to be taken to either recruit appropriately-qualified staff or develop existing teachers to the level needed. The recruitment of PT teachers from the business or industry concerned is clearly an option.

²⁰ Baroness Sharp of Guildford. 2011. *A dynamic nucleus: Colleges at the heart of their local Communities*. Leicester, NIACE.

²¹ RCU. 2017. *College Based Higher Education*. RCU and ETF.

In addition to academic or professional qualifications, the different pedagogical demands of teaching HE must also be examined. Although it may be tempting to assume that excellent teaching in FE, as judged by Ofsted, will remain excellent when the same staff teach at higher level, this is not necessarily true. The focus placed in HE on developing independent learners and research skills calls for a different or enhanced skill set, similar to that required of university teachers.²² The 'higher technical' nature of much HE in FE brings additional demands in terms of the need to ensure teachers are credible practitioners in their parent profession and have a good grasp of the issues facing that particular business or industry.

Recruiting staff with this level of experience and expertise can raise issues about salary and conditions of service. Attracting staff of the right calibre can be challenging and may require the use of market-related supplements. Some colleges have experimented with separate conditions of service for staff teaching HE, mirroring those offered in universities, but this has not been widely adopted. Few FE colleges have maintained this model as it raised questions about equity of approach to staff teaching FE. Most colleges are unable to offer HE-only teaching timetables: as a result, most teachers will find themselves teaching both HE and FE. Further discussion of this area can be found in *Chapter 4*.

A parallel analysis of physical resources will also be required. HE courses addressing a need for higher technical skills will undoubtedly make greater demands for industry-standard technology and specialist software. Such facilities will be expensive and thus raise questions about the cost effectiveness of any higher-level offer.

To reflect the distinctive nature of HE, colleges sometimes provide separate accommodation for higher-level students, in some cases basing their HE offer on a separate campus. Where numbers permit, this can be an attractive option for students as it gives the opportunity to create a distinctive environment similar to that offered by a university. Adopting

²² King, M. and Widdowson, J. 2012. *Inspiring individuals: Teaching higher education in a further education college*. York, Higher Education Academy.

this approach carries the risk that a 'two cultures' model develops, with FE and HE provision drifting apart. That said, teaching HE and FE alongside each other raises similar challenges. Principal among these is the need to provide distinctiveness in approach, often described as securing the 'HE-ness' of what is taught. However, there are arguments favouring this approach which point to the advantages of having teachers with experience of both types of provision and the inspirational impact on FE students who see people like themselves successfully studying for higher qualifications.

Only six colleges have obtained foundation degree awarding powers (FDAP) and only two have full taught degree awarding powers (TDAP). All other colleges are reliant on their partner universities either to validate or franchise their HE provision. Even in the case of foundation degree awarding colleges, all but one work with a validating partner for provision at Level 6 and above. Offering HE brings with it a dependency on a partner university: leaders and governors need to assess what this will mean for them in their immediate locality.

Governors have a key role to play in overseeing the development of an HE strategy, discharging their duty to determine the mission and character of the college in a thoughtful and responsible manner. They should be alive to the risks of 'mission drift', in other words losing sight of the core FE mission of the college in favour of what might be superficially attractive higher-level provision. Senior managers may be drawn to offer HE either because of its higher prestige or as a source of additional income in hard financial times.

Without a more logical rationale, such ventures are likely to be unsuccessful. It is the duty of the governing body to insist on a more measured approach, even to the point of deciding that, for their college, HE does not present a feasible way forward. For some, a more difficult decision may be to discontinue offering HE in order to focus on the core FE mission.

Board members must also be aware that the metrics surrounding HE are not those of Ofsted. The approach taken by the QAA to quality assurance is very different, potentially increasing the cost of delivery and complicating the nature of the performance data available to

governors. Governors must thus be confident that they, as a body, have the necessary knowledge and expertise to oversee a mixed-economy model of delivery. Unless the college leadership accepts that meeting QAA standards is an imperative rather than an option, any venture into HE will fail. Being rated as 'outstanding' or 'good' by OFSTED has no influence at all over the judgement of the quality assurance body for HE. Finally, offering HE will present new questions as to pricing and market position. Many colleges will be unaccustomed to this. It will be discussed in more detail in *Chapter 5*.

Summary: Developing an HE strategy

- Review the college's strengths and weaknesses, critically assessing whether the FE base provides a strong start point.
- Analyse the local market for HE to establish need and demand.
- Assess the college's staffing and resource capacity to offer high-quality HE.
- Determine the curriculum offer; filling gaps or offering progression.
- Ensure arrangements for management and governance are robust and informed.
- Meet employer demand for higher-level skills at local level.

CHAPTER 3

UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS, QUALIFICATIONS AND AWARDING POWERS

Being dependent on a university for validation puts colleges in a subservient position and at the mercy of universities making decisions about withdrawing partnerships, not least when universities and colleges are competing for the same students... This is exactly why either colleges should be able to have awarding powers themselves, or there should be some sort of degree awarding council.

Jonathan Simons, Head of Education, Policy Exchange, 2015

College-university partnerships

In order to deliver HE, most colleges have no option but to work in partnership with one or more universities. The Learning and Skills Act 2007 made provision for FE colleges to seek approval to award their own foundation degrees, potentially breaking the monopoly of universities in that area of HE provision. However, the process of application is very much the same as that required for full taught degree awarding powers (TDAP) up to Level 7. In the minds of many college leaders, the requirements for evidence of research, scholarship and scholarly activity place unreasonable obstacles in the way of essentially vocational institutions whose role does not include original research. Evidence of professional updating and business or industry links rarely meets the QAA's requirement for embedded scholarship and scholarly activity. In consequence, few colleges have pursued this route and, thus, CBHE is characterised by a partnership arrangement between the college and one or more universities.

Successful partnerships between colleges and universities depend on a number of factors. An agreement at the very start of any partnership

discussion as to the purpose and motivation for the partnership is crucial. Detailed guidance on the establishment of college-university partnerships was drafted by the Mixed Economy Group for the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) in 2012.²³ It remains relevant today.

A number of drivers can lie at the heart of a partnership. The university may see the college primarily as a source of undergraduate students and seek to put progression arrangements at the heart of the relationship. Validation of college-based provision may not be seen as a priority. The validating institution may only wish to validate courses it sees as not being in competition with its own offer. It may seek to restrict validation to certain curriculum areas, levels of study or modes of delivery. This may in turn frustrate college ambitions and eventually result in new partnerships being sought. In other cases, a more transactional relationship may be created, based simply on the purchase of course validations. This clearly establishes a more commercial relationship, which may be considered and operated as such by both partners.

Although it can seem attractive to form links with the closest university to the college, this sometimes gives rise to fears of competition on the part of the university, which can develop into open rivalry for students. Other factors may determine the best match in the local circumstances, for example working with an HEI partner with a recognised subject specialism. Organisationally, HEI/FEC partnerships take two main forms, with examples of both models being followed within the same partnership.

For colleges with limited experience of HE, a 'franchising' arrangement is often preferred. Under this, the college delivers a course on behalf of the university. In most cases, the course is the same as that delivered by the university and is funded by it. The college recruits the students and supplies the staff to teach them. The students are closely identified with and, in a real sense, 'belong' to the university. A second approach is via a validation agreement with the university, usually supported by a separate funding agreement and individual course approvals. The college

²³ Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS). 2012. *FE College/HE Institution Partnership Checklist*.

secures (and pays for) course validation and recruits the students using its own Student Loan Company allocation or other source of fees, e.g. from employers. The students can therefore be viewed as very much belonging to the college, although issues such as quality assurance may be subject to the regulations of the university.

The vast majority of colleges are forced to rely on university partners for validation of their prescribed HE courses and, in some cases, for the funding itself. In parallel, however, many colleges have continued to offer Higher National Diplomas and Certificates in response to continued demand from employers: these are known and trusted qualifications and do not, in all cases, require university involvement (the number of entrants to college HN courses has doubled since 2010/11).²⁴ Colleges have also continued to offer a range of NPHE courses (see above) leading to qualifications offered by professional bodies and higher-level National Vocational Qualifications designed to recognise workplace competence. The review of technical qualifications undertaken by Lord Sainsbury promises further 'T' qualifications at levels 4 and 5.

When introduced, foundation degrees were overtly aimed at responding to employers' needs for sub-degree qualifications. Given this intended focus, many expected that pre-existing qualifications at this level, principally HNCs and HNDs, would disappear rapidly. Although foundation degrees achieved their target of 100,000 awards ahead of schedule, many colleges and universities continue to offer successful HN programmes. The construction and engineering sectors have maintained confidence in Higher Nationals: both industries have well-established licences to practice and have integrated the Higher National into their framework for professional qualifications. Foundation degrees appear to have had more success in areas without such a strongly embedded history or where the progression pathways to study at Level 6 are more apparent.

²⁴ HEFCE. 2017. *Higher Education in England 2017. Key Facts*. Bristol, HEFCE.

Key points about partnerships

Some college/university partnerships undoubtedly work well, with both parties content with the validation and financial arrangements and seeing mutual benefit in maintaining the relationship. This may be favoured by colleges relatively new to HE which value the support given and the prestige which may be attributed to the university name. They may also have limited ambitions for their HE offer, choosing instead to focus on their core FE mission. The university may, in turn, and by agreement, limit the range and level of HE they are prepared to support, regarding the college as part of a progression chain in which members understand their respective roles and priorities.

Some colleges have decided to work with more than one partner. This can happen for several reasons. A particular university can be perceived as having specialist subject knowledge relevant to the programme proposed for validation, with the enhanced opportunities this may give for college staff development or curriculum enhancement. Colleges may decide to conclude partnerships with more than one university (up to six having been recorded) seeking to hedge against failure in any one relationship but complicating delivery by having to work to multiple quality assurance and validation systems, often for relatively small numbers of HE students.

Because of their role as local anchor institutions, colleges are more likely than universities to have an awareness of the impact of geography on the ability of local residents to access HE, and/or the relative lack of provision for particular technical or occupational specialisms. Some areas have no local university at all, others have a university but its focus is at national or international level with a strong emphasis on research. In these instances, concerns over competition with the validating or franchising university will be minimal.

In some areas, widening participation among groups and individuals less likely to participate in HE can be a fruitful area of collaboration. By their nature, colleges attract a high proportion of such students, many of whom have the ability to succeed in HE. However, they are often 'fragile' learners, needing support to gain confidence and realise their potential.

Close collaboration between the college and a university partner can help to address these issues, perhaps by agreeing 'two plus one' models where the first two years of a programme are delivered in the familiar setting of the college with progression to the university for a final year.

Partnerships can also take advantage of the complementary strengths of the partners. For example, many colleges have valuable experience in delivering apprenticeships beyond Level 3. Following the introduction of the apprenticeship levy, many universities, particularly post-1992 institutions, are seeking to expand their provision in this area. Colleges' anchor status within their communities is their most valuable asset: this, together with their awareness of skill 'cold spots',²⁵ their familiarity with ESFA funding procedures and their more established employer liaison structures can give a real competitive advantage in delivering Higher Apprenticeships. Collaboration with universities in the delivery of Degree Apprenticeships is already taking place in some colleges.

Unfortunately, several existing partnerships have foundered as pressures mount and the HE landscape evolves. A change of university vice-chancellor can prompt an institution to review its partnership strategy, resulting in significant changes of direction over a relatively short period of time. Universities may also react to cost pressures by increasing the charges made for validation, seek to impose the same fee as that charged by the university (when many colleges may see lower fees as an incentive for widening participation students to enrol) or impose restrictions on the type or level of provision validated. Colleges have also expressed concerns at the length of time it can sometimes take for universities to validate courses, with waiting times of up to 18 months cited as normal. As colleges offer mainly technical or vocational provision in response to employer demand, this can be too long a lead time. Employers generally want a rapid response to their needs, which a lengthy approval process cannot deliver.

Whatever the purpose of a college-university partnership, careful attention must be paid to the conditions and obligations contained in the partnership agreement.

²⁵ See the range of POLAR charts prepared by HEFCE in 2017

In addition to the details of course validation, financial arrangements and other matters relevant to programme delivery, consideration must also be given to arrangements for termination of the partnership. This would include provision for teach-out and notice of termination. In the case of the former, both institutions are committed to ensuring that students already on programme are given appropriate time to complete their studies. For PT students on flexible programmes this can be a period of up to five years. Notice of termination can create more problems. Many agreements set out a period of one academic year (with suitable notice periods). Although this may at first appear reasonable, colleges have experienced difficulty in securing a partnership with a new university in that period. Partnership discussions can be protracted, especially with partners new to each other. Prolonged discussions with a new validating partner can create significant concerns for existing CBHE students. Course content, including modular structures, may be different, as may fee levels.

Qualifications, validation and awarding powers

Reference was made above to the distinction between prescribed and non-prescribed HE. For many colleges, NPHE is an important element of their offer. Studied in the main by PT students working in their chosen professional field, these qualifications often function as a licence to practice in that field. Students see a clear link between possessing a qualification and progressing in their chosen profession or career. Assessment is usually by accepted traditional measures such as time-constrained examination. Pass rates can be low when compared with degrees. Higher NVQs (at Level 4 and above) are workplace-based and require significant employer commitment. Precise numbers of enrolments are difficult to obtain, not least because many qualifications are offered on a fully-funded basis, paid for by employers and/or students who do not draw down loans. The professional bodies themselves offer tuition, often by distance learning; a number of alternative providers still offer large amounts of provision in this area, including business disciplines such as law and accounting.

Choosing the path to validation which is right for the college involves important decisions about resources (staffing and physical), clarity on costs, a comparison of working in partnership with self-funded autonomy and, above all, consideration of the strategic purpose of offering HE in the first place. Assuming the college has determined a strategy it believes presents the right way forward, the course offer is likely to be carefully tailored to a local or regional jobs market. Unlike universities, which are likely to offer only degrees validated by their own institution, colleges will potentially have a range of qualification aims, including degrees validated by one or more universities, Higher National awards, higher-level NVQs and professional qualifications. They are also likely to have full- and part-time students, including those in employment. HE in FE is therefore a complex environment, requiring reasoned choices and long-term commitment.

The more open HE environment outlined in recent reforms promises a greater role for employers. Colleges have worked with employers for many years, including collaborating on the design and delivery of apprenticeships. The introduction of the apprenticeship levy may change the dynamics of those relationships as employers exercise their newly acquired 'buying power'. They will make decisions about how to use their purchasing power to raise the skills of their workforce and encourage the best quality new entrants to their business. Employers may also become more concerned about quality, taking the view that 'their' money has been invested in the Higher or Degree Apprenticeship. This then raises the question of whose definition of 'quality' becomes the most important – that of the employer, the academic or the student.

Managing partnerships

- Assess the robustness of existing validation partnerships in terms of accessibility, value for money and 'fit'.
- Establish a local partner or 'best fit'.
- Establish the aims of the partnership, identifying mutual benefits.
- Agree mutual strengths and weaknesses.
- Agree joint approaches to new initiatives such as Higher and Degree Apprenticeships.
- Pay attention to and understand the details of the partnership agreement.

CHAPTER 4

SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES

We don't have any big employers in our area, so we have to work harder than most. We pride ourselves on not only listening to what our SMEs [small and medium-sized enterprises] say but responding with an offer that's relevant to existing and future needs – and that includes devising part-time programmes specifically for part-time students, rather than just adapting existing FT ones.

FE college director of HE

In this section, we examine how FE colleges organise themselves to deliver HE. From the evidence available, there appears to be no consensus as to the best college structures to support the HE offer. In some colleges, HE is seen as directly linked with the FE courses offered by the college. There is considerable logic in this, particularly for colleges new to HE or with a relatively small or specialised offer. Specialist equipment can be shared across the HE and FE curriculum. On occasion, staff who find themselves teaching across HE and FE programmes face the challenge of having to change method and approach to take level into account. This can be demanding, requiring significant changes in method and approach in a short space of time. However, they are able to make links between FE and HE courses and encourage progression between levels.

A small number of colleges have experimented with different conditions of service for HE teachers. Those conditions seek to reflect those enjoyed by university lecturers including fewer taught hours, access to higher levels of salary and remitted time for scholarly activity. This can give rise to complications. Few colleges can offer teachers a full timetable of HE teaching other than in specialised subject areas. The perception that these teachers are being more favourably treated can cause teachers at other levels to question the value attached to their own work. Differential salary levels could give rise to 'equal value' claims.

In contrast, some colleges, usually larger providers, treat HE and FE provision separately but maintain the same conditions of service. Flexibility is achieved by introducing measures which overtly support the enhancement of HE teaching without raising too many issues of preferential treatment. Examples include prioritising HE teachers for supported study on higher-level degrees, focused staff development and projects aimed specifically at scholarship or scholarly activity.

Creating a distinctive HE environment can be achieved in other ways. At its most extreme, this can involve separate facilities, even separate campuses for HE and FE students. The underpinning rationale is based on a desire (and, often, an expectation from students) that the HE offer will be distinctive from FE and recognisably similar to the facilities enjoyed by HE students at a university. Separate study and social facilities can help to establish this. However, there may be significant cost implications, suggesting that scale of provision will be a key issue. It may also have an adverse impact on internal progression as HE and FE students are not able to study alongside each other. At its worst, the latter may feel undervalued and less well treated.

Ensuring effective quality assurance requires similar decisions. The quality of CBHE will always be perceived as contestable by competitor providers of prescribed HE. It is therefore vital that colleges direct sufficient time and resources to this aspect of HE delivery to eliminate any suggestion that college-based provision is in any way second class or of inferior quality. For many colleges, the demands of Ofsted predominate when it comes to systems for quality assurance. Although such an approach can ensure rigour and close attention to data and performance measures, delivering high-quality HE requires a wholly different approach. The QAA places great emphasis on quality enhancement and the student experience. This has been underlined with the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF).

Attempting to integrate what are essentially two different philosophies of quality management can be superficially attractive but carries with it risk that, in doing so, neither area of study is served well. Annual national performance benchmarks are a trusted means of assessing the performance of individual FE courses and the college as

a whole. Such data is not available in HE, or at least not with the same promptness. Where they do exist, they are not the same as those used for FE provision. This absence (for what is always a minority of college provision) can cause confusion especially if senior leaders and members of governing bodies are not clear about the relevant performance indicators in each sector and seek to extend the norms from one into the other.

As indicated above, the TEF is the latest and perhaps most visible measure for HE provision. Although a voluntary exercise and linked initially to removing a barrier to the raising of fees, the TEF has quickly come to be regarded as a recognised measure of HE quality. Some 295 institutions participated in the first exercise, of which 106 were colleges. Of these, 14 achieved Gold, 46 Silver and 31 Bronze. Despite being a measure which purports to assess teaching excellence, the TEF does not actually involve observing or making judgements about teaching. Instead, it uses proxies such as ratings from the National Student Survey (NSS) and the survey of Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE). Many colleges have expressed concerns that the metrics used are, perhaps unsurprisingly, better suited to universities. For example, a substantial number of colleges have historically had a balance of full- and part-time provision. A metric in the DLHE around salary six months after graduation, which is designed for FT students entering employment, may not be best suited to measure the success of PT students already in employment: their prospects of promotion and higher salary depend much more on the needs of an employer and their own geographic immobility. Nevertheless, achieving a higher-level qualification may represent a major milestone for the student, who is often the first in their family to reach this level.

Many colleges deliver a large amount of provision at sub-degree level, principally HNs and foundation degrees. It seems obvious that financial rewards for the possession of such qualifications will not earn the same 'graduate premium', even if the student is not only aware of this before study but readily accepts it. The metrics embedded in the DLHE do not appear to reflect this. Nevertheless, if HE in FE is to be seen as of equal value to HE delivered by universities, it must accept measurement against the same metrics. The challenge may be to ensure that those

metrics reflect the increasingly diverse nature of HE in England while also enabling comparisons to be made between similar providers.

As indicated throughout this work, courses of HE will, by definition, make up only a small proportion of the total college offer. There are, therefore, obvious implications for HE teachers and those leaders responsible for developing and deploying them. Investigation of the potential for a distinctive pedagogy of HE in FE has proved inconclusive.²⁶ Teachers often see benefits in teaching both HE and FE, adapting successful approaches from FE, with its emphasis on individual learning gain, combined with the greater depth of subject knowledge demanded by HE. Research undertaken by the Mixed Economy Group for the HEA identified that college HE teachers see their roles primarily as teachers, and do not engage in academic research as a major activity. A high premium is placed by students and teachers alike on industrial updating and the relevance of what is taught to real-life professional issues. Nevertheless, part of the 'higher' approach requires familiarity with current research in the subject being taught and this often involves undertaking research projects, albeit of a limited nature. As Healey et al describe, research projects undertaken jointly by teachers and their/class student are a growing area of interest.²⁷

Colleges actively seeking awarding powers and others with ambitions in that direction have taken a more focused approach to scholarship. HEFCE has funded a number of projects which aim to engage colleges, working in collaboration, in specific aspects of research and scholarly activity. These include a HEFCE-funded project managed by the Association of Colleges, aimed at promoting scholarly activity among HE teaching staff.²⁸ Although not aimed primarily at the blue-skies research undertaken by universities these projects have ignited interest in a more structured approach to research in FE colleges. However, it

²⁶ King, M. and Widdowson, J. 2012. *Inspiring Individuals: Teaching higher education in a further education college*. York, HEA.

²⁷ Healey, M., Jenkins, A, and Lea, J. 2013. *Developing research-based curricula in college-based higher education*. York, HEA.

²⁸ Enhancing scholarship in college higher education: the scholarship project. See <https://www.aoc.co.uk/enhancing-scholarship-in-college-higher-education-the-scholarship-project>.

remains to be seen how colleges will sustain them when the project funding ends.

New pathways to higher-level qualifications will result in further new approaches. For example, Higher and Degree Apprenticeships require a close relationship between the student, the employer and the education provider. In these cases, it is likely that a renewed emphasis will be placed on the higher-level skills required in the workplace rather than on traditional academic skills and knowledge. This will challenge accepted views of scholarship and may well add to the debate about whether such provision sits comfortably with more conservative views of the norms of HE.

Within the college, the separate teams which deal with careers information, advice and guidance, apprenticeships and HE need to establish clear lines of communication to ensure that employers and students are given a complete picture. A college's NPHE is rarely viewed as a whole, and is almost never combined in policy or practice with prescribed HE by senior management teams. Indeed, in some colleges there is little or no central co-ordination of HE provision, particularly where that provision is seen as closely linked with the FE offer. The arrival of Higher and Degree Apprenticeships makes a reconsideration of these internal divisions necessary, as will the projected arrival of institutes of technology. Some dilemmas are common on both sides of the Atlantic: the American community college system was established with a clear remit to provide workforce development at all levels and also to deliver HE in a manner which was socially inclusive. Writing in America in 2000 during a period of increasing federal and state demands (and reducing funding) on the community college system, Warford and Flynn²⁹ posed three questions to college leaders:

- How well do these divisions mesh together to provide seamless responses to a myriad of workforce development trends, programmes and opportunities?

²⁹ Warford, L. and Flynn, W. 2000. New Game, New Rules: Strategic Positioning for Workforce Development. *Community College Journal*.

- How much do internal politics, history and campus inertia impact on your ability as CEO to respond to national initiatives as well as local needs?
- What can you do about it?

The authors suggested that, in difficult times, the familiar structures and mechanisms that have proved comforting in the past can inhibit leaders from adopting necessarily more radical approaches to a new situation, but noted that 'Change is debilitating when done to us, but exhilarating when done by us.'

Summary

- Decide on the best structure for the delivery of 'your' HE.
- Determine how research, scholarship and scholarly activity are to be managed.
- Ensure that internal communications are coordinated and effective when dealing with employers and students.
- Maintain robust HE quality assurance systems.
- Support teachers in industrial updating and professional development.

CHAPTER 5

THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

My first experience of HE college and I really enjoy the subject. The tutor is excellent and has excellent resources that she uses effectively so learning takes place

College HE student

Individuals choose to study for a higher education qualification in an FE college for a variety of reasons. Previous research by the Mixed Economy Group of colleges³⁰ for the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) suggests that college location, the availability of the preferred course and high levels of contact time are important considerations. The lower cost of study (including the reduced cost of living at home while studying) also featured highly. The key drivers in the decision to study may also be influenced by the preferred mode of study. In other words, PT students may be motivated by different factors to those which help to form the decisions of FT students. Age is also likely to be influential. Nevertheless, for most students the decision to study HE in a college environment is a deliberate choice.

For FT students, the decision to study can be based on a number of factors. Among these, easy, local accessibility figures very highly. For mature students, family and other responsibilities can severely restrict geographical mobility. Such students may not have complete discretion over subject choice: in many cases they accept a 'best fit' from courses offered in their locality. For other students, the course they wish to study may only be offered by their local college as it is highly vocational in nature and has a direct line of sight to employment. As indicated earlier in this work, the CBHE offer is predominantly vocational or professional in nature, aimed at developing practical higher-level skills as well as offering specialised routes not found in universities. Examples include travel and tourism, aspects of health and social care, construction, and hospitality and catering.

³⁰ LSIS. 2010. *HE in FE: Strategic options, operational challenges*. London, LSIS.

Many HE in FE students are the first in their family to consider higher-level study. In some cases, their earlier school career may not have been successful and, in the absence of suitable role models, they may have doubts about their ability to cope with higher-level study. In other words, without appropriate support and encouragement they may be less likely to enrol or continue with their studies. Similar considerations can also make students more likely stay near to their homes so that they can maintain the PT employment necessary for economic survival. Others may place a high premium on maintaining social networks or have other cultural or religious reasons for wishing to stay close to home. Similar considerations will also apply to looked-after children.

First-time learners may also find the prospect of three years of FT study daunting. This can make some two-year courses, such as foundation degrees and Higher Nationals, attractive, particularly if they have the option to 'top up' to a full honours degree either by a third year of study or via a PT route while in employment. Elsewhere in this chapter, we will consider the impact of fee levels on student participation, examining issues of price sensitivity.

For students who have already followed a course of vocational FE at Level 3, progression to a related higher-level course at the same college can be an attractive proposition. All the social and personal considerations dealt with above can be maintained. The college environment and the teachers will be familiar and existing friendship groups will continue. Students will not face the potentially disruptive challenge of meeting new people in a new environment. Many CBHE students undertook their FE in the same institution, moving either directly to an HE course or returning to study after a period of employment, making this a significant area of growth for HE in FE.³¹

The distinctive characteristics of the HE in FE student require a different response from institutions. This may be easier for smaller FE colleges than larger HEIs, for whom the vast majority of students are younger school leavers with traditional entry qualifications. The curriculum delivery model may need to have a degree of flexibility not always easily achieved by universities. To help students maintain PT jobs, class hours may be concentrated on

³¹ Ibid.

two or three days each week. Students can thus make arrangements for part-time work to be undertaken on days when they are not expected to be in the college. This pattern of curriculum delivery can also help students with significant responsibilities for children or dependent adults. Greater flexibility over start and finish times and half-term breaks will make successful study a realistic possibility for this particular group of students.

Many HE in FE students will either re-enter education after a lengthy break or have progressed from a vocational course which may have been assessed through continuous or work-based assessment rather than more academic pathways such as GCE Advanced level. Consideration will have to be given to the appropriate level of support needed by such students if their HE course requires competence in these 'academic' skills. A key aim of any higher professional and technical course is to enable the student to become an independent learner and a reflective practitioner. At the same time, an appropriate balance must be struck between providing the support needed (too much of which may be seen as 'spoon-feeding' or 'over-teaching') and an over-enthusiastic approach to independent learning. This risks leaving the student feeling isolated or, at its most extreme, left to fend for themselves.

CBHE has other characteristics which develop this theme. Class sizes tend to be smaller than the equivalent found in a university. It is possible to find many classes which struggle to achieve double figures but few which exceed 20 or 30 students. For many non-college providers, such numbers would be financially unviable and undoubtedly lead to the discontinuation of the course. The lower cost base within colleges means that these courses can be delivered successfully and sustainably. Alongside smaller class sizes, colleges will, on average, provide more contact hours, either in formal classes or in supervised tutorials. Some colleges also make use of specialist staff to provide focused support in academic skills such as essay writing, academic referencing and presentation skills. This activity can also help to identify other longer-term learning issues, such as dyslexia, which might have previously gone undiagnosed, particularly among mature students.

In *Chapter 2*, reference was made to the steps taken by some colleges to provide separate learning and social facilities for higher-level learners. Without rehearsing those arguments again, successive surveys have

shown³² that many HE in FE students appreciate the opportunity to share social facilities with students on similar courses and of similar ages. However, opinion is more divided over other aspects of the student experience when compared to that offered by universities. The advantages of smaller size are balanced by the inability to make economies of scale not just financially but in terms of the extra-curricular activities offered by most universities. Given the small number of HE students, it can be difficult to maintain social events and sports activities, especially if those students do not see the college as central to their lives outside study. However, choosing HE in FE is a conscious choice for most HE in FE learners. Part-time students, in particular, choose to forego the 'student life style' because they wish to pursue such activities in familiar circles and/or have not sought it as part of their HE experience.

The expectations of PT students reflect many of the aspects of FT study raised above by mature students. With the caveat that they are the most heterogeneous of student groups, many CBHE PT students are also employed full-time. They are often supported in their studies by their employers as much to add value to the business as for any altruistic intent to benefit them as individuals. Combining full-time work with PT study clearly raises challenges. Part-time students often identify themselves not as students but as employees undertaking a course as required by their employer. They may have very different expectations of the student experience. Research undertaken by the Mixed Economy Group indicates that teaching quality and the vocational credibility of college lecturers are considered to be the most important factors for these students.³³ In other words, college staff teaching students employed in the same professional area are expected to be both good teachers and up to date with developments in their professional discipline.

This is hardly surprising, given the demands made on employed students. For them, study is undoubtedly important but is inevitably viewed as a secondary concern compared with the demands of meeting their employer's needs and, at the same time, sustaining a personal

³² Ibid, see also MEG and 157 Group. 2012. *Shaping the Future: Opportunities for HE provision in FE colleges*.

42 ³³ King, M. and Widdowson, J. 2012. *Inspiring individuals: Teaching higher education in a further education college*. York, Higher Education Academy.

and family life. Part-time students are less concerned (if at all) about some of the attractions of higher level-study promoted by universities, such as sports facilities, student union activities and social interaction. Contact with active researchers at the cutting edge of their subject is valued less than those attributes in academic staff which have a direct link to success in the workplace. Students expect teachers to have up-to-date knowledge of current practice and an enthusiasm to develop skills which will help them progress within their company or sector. They may challenge teachers who do not evidence current practice or who fail to demonstrate relevant knowledge. Given the need to balance work and study, PT students expect a high level of engagement while in class, along with inspiring and interesting teaching and a high level of taught or directed activity rather than private study. The message for college leaders is to ensure that all students, but in particular PT students, believe that time spent in college-based directed study is time well spent.

The introduction of student fees in 2012 and the subsequent shift to loans for both course fees and maintenance has placed greater emphasis on perceptions of value for money. Although most universities have decided to charge fees for FT courses at or near the maximum permitted, those charged by colleges show a greater range. Some have decided to keep fees as low as possible to attract learners who might otherwise be discouraged from participation by their aversion to debt. This is seen as a proxy for widening participation among lower socio-economic groups. Not every college offering HE has submitted an Access Agreement to the Office for Fair Access, meaning that their fee remains at £6,000 or less. Others have submitted agreements permitting them to charge a fee between £6,000 and the maximum.

Although the fees and loans regime is still in its early years and the 'market' barely formed, emerging evidence suggests that younger FT students are relatively unconcerned at the level of fee charged (although these attitudes are expressed in an environment where the charging of fees is the norm; the response may be different if given an option of HE free at the point of delivery). In other words, colleges offering lower

fees do not appear to have seen any increase in their FT enrolments and those charging a higher fee have not seen a decline. In each case, numbers have stayed at about the same level. Price elasticity does not appear to be a determining factor for FT students.

The PT market appears to be responding to higher fee levels very differently. Many employers pay at least part of the fee for their employees or give in-kind benefits such as day release or study leave. However, for many employers the cost of education courses is seen as a cost of the business and thus subject to the same cost-reduction pressures as any other part of the value chain. In 2012, when fees for FT students leapt, in some cases from £3,000 to a maximum of £9,000, many providers decided, not illogically, to set PT fees pro rata to their FT equivalents. In many cases, this represented a three-fold increase in costs to employers, with little notice. Given that enterprises of all sizes set training budgets in advance, the response of many employers was simply to reduce the number of students they funded to one-third. This response will undoubtedly have contributed to the massive decline in PT students experienced by colleges and universities alike since 2010/11.

Setting an appropriate fee presents a new challenge for college leaders. The impact may depend on local circumstances, including competition from other local providers. As indicated earlier, colleges claim to offer more taught hours per week, smaller class sizes and greater levels of individual student support. All of this costs money. Coupled with the costs of securing validation either from a partner university or the college seeking validation powers of its own, HE in FE can be relatively expensive to deliver. Without a substantial critical mass of HE, economies of scale can be difficult to achieve. An irresistible pressure to charge higher fees may develop as other costs rise.³⁴

PT and FT students are two distinct markets for CBHE. The two groups have different expectations and aspirations and they require differentiated approaches which reflect this. The development of Higher and Degree Apprenticeships introduces a new dimension to this situation as employers decide how to use the apprenticeship levy to

³⁴ HEFCE. 2017. *Higher Education in England 2017*. Bristol, HEFCE.

their best advantage. Whatever the outcome of this new approach, it is likely to call for much better dialogue between providers, students and employers to ensure that the needs of all three are recognised.

Higher and degree-level apprentices see themselves primarily as employees: that is why they have chosen that route. They will require a very direct link to their workplace, acquiring knowledge and developing skills which have an immediate impact. Employers will wish to be informed about and involved in course content. They too will see the apprenticeship route as integrated into their business with a direct impact on business success. Traditional concepts of academic years and patterns of attendance will be called into question as apprentices are recruited throughout the year. The challenge for providers will be to design and deliver courses which combine both sets of aspirations. Colleges are experienced in doing this and are well placed to play a leading role.

Students expect:

- good teaching;
- teachers with a undisputed business or industry credibility;
- an 'HE' learning environment;
- the right balance between independent learning and student support;
- distinctive courses for full- and part-time students;
- value for money.

CHAPTER 6

LEADING HE IN FE

An increased focus on HE within the college has highlighted the need for scholarly activity. This need has been identified and addressed through staff development activities.

Senior college manager

Management development programmes for senior managers, including aspiring principals, have been available to college leaders for many years. Many will be familiar with well-established risk management analysis tools such as PEST (political, economic, social and technological influences), which require a focus on external factors, and SWOT (strengths, weaknesses opportunities and threats) with its more intra-organisational focus. Some will be familiar with the debate concerning the supremacy of culture over strategy in terms of key decision-making factors. All of these approaches have value when reviewing current or future HE provision.

The demands made of senior leaders in a college offering HE will obviously be more complex and potentially more demanding than those found in a college which remains wedded to its core FE mission. Indeed, before embarking on HE delivery, colleges should consider those demands and be certain that they have effective strategies for dealing with them. To ignore this is to risk putting undue pressures on the people involved and can, ultimately, have an adverse effect on the FE student experience, performance and standards:

In decisions about the conduct and future of higher education in colleges, issues of scale, balance and coherence are paramount. Colleges with small amounts of higher education confront particular difficulties: in generating a critical mass sufficient to support and sustain a culture of HE; in securing its integration within the college curriculum; and in ensuring progression to other types and providers of HE.³⁵

³⁵ Parry, G. 2013. Colleges and the governance of higher education. *Higher Education Quarterly*. Volume 67, Issue 4, pp. 315–339

Moving into HE delivery for the first time is a major step. The culture and expectations of HE are very different to those in FE and the environment is intensely competitive. While the college can reasonably assume that it would recruit HE students from existing FE groups, their expectations, in a world where all student funding is via loans rather than grants, will be high, as will those of the HE funding and quality agencies. Unless the college is certain that it can create an HE community for its staff as well as its students, the venture into HE should be reconsidered. A minimum critical mass of HE, both in the college as a whole and even on individual courses, is necessary in order to embed the cultural and structural approaches necessary for successful HE delivery.

In deciding to offer HE, college leaders will have to be sure that demand can be sustained over several years, that the college has the capacity, both in terms of staff and resources, to deliver to the expected standard and that all the costs of providing the HE programme have been taken into account. There is evidently a need for college leaders to have a clear view of the commercial implications of their decisions and a good understanding of the needs and priorities of their local employers. The delivery of HE is potentially high risk, due to a sometimes predatory approach by local universities for FT students and price sensitivity among employers and PT students.

Decisions must be made about the curriculum to be offered. For example, at 'sub-degree' level (levels 4 and 5) college leaders must choose between alternative qualifications, encompassing foundation degrees, Higher National awards and professional qualifications. Such complexity does not usually confront universities, most of which offer a fixed range of honours degrees at Level 6. In addition to the obvious need to establish student demand, college leaders need to understand the preferences of employers, especially when considering PT courses. For example, despite the attention paid to foundation degrees, emerging evidence appears to show more colleges returning to Higher National awards, either due to difficulties experienced with validating partners or because the Higher National is seen as a more applied qualification compared to a foundation degree (the latter is often perceived to function primarily as a stepping stone to a Level 6 honours degree).

In other fields, students and employers may be interested in acquiring a licence to practice in their profession and thus look to qualifications which can most readily achieve that.

Local and regional employers are valuable assets and time spent with them is rarely wasted. Familiarity with local labour market needs and trends is vital and a good system of labour market information (whether in-house or via an outside agency such as a LEP) should be considered. Staff at all levels, both in FE and HE, should be able to share information about local skills needs and plan future provision. This is particularly beneficial if thought is being given to the development of Higher or Degree Apprenticeships, where the culture and content crosses several college teams.

Should the college decide to become, as far as possible, an autonomous HE provider, appropriate systems to manage that delivery must be introduced. In many cases, especially where the HE provision is small in scale, it can be tempting to make systems for matters such as quality assurance and data management common across the college, using the same approach for both FE and HE provision. While the cost savings are obvious, there is a significant risk that a one-size-fits-all approach will not meet the needs of either type of activity.

College leaders will also have important decisions to make about the deployment of staff. The demands and expectations of teaching further and higher education are different. As indicated elsewhere, HE teachers are expected to have an academic or professional qualification above that which they teach and a familiarity with current scholarship in their discipline over and above that required to teach FE. Both government and QAA have clear expectations as to what constitutes an HE culture and expect evidence of an embedded commitment to scholarly activity. In some, staff teaching HE are given priority in studying for higher degrees, while, in others, funds are set aside for scholarly activity by teaching staff, either acting independently or in association with other colleges or partner universities. A beneficial aspect of the franchise relationship is likely to be the access to master's or PhD programmes offered to college teaching staff by the partner university, as well as to a range of staff development activities.

Managing relationships with partner universities can place new demands on college leaders, as detailed in *Chapter 3*. The operation of these crucial partnerships will vary according to the wishes and decisions of institutional leaders and relationships within and between university and college staff teams. These range from those described as 'feudal' to those conducted in a more open and collegiate manner. Whatever the nature of the partnership, college leaders will need to devote time, thought and energy to playing their full part in ensuring that colleges are treated fairly and with respect.

Leading HE in FE can be challenging for even experienced professionals. Ensuring that members of college governing bodies can provide the correct level of challenge and support is equally demanding. Many of the national benchmarks available for FE provision do not exist in the same form, if at all, for HE programmes. Recent history provides many examples of why college leaders must develop measures of HE performance which are transparent and easily understood by governors more versed in FE norms.

To manage and deliver HE in FE, college leaders should:

- have a clear rationale and strategy for their HE offer;
- understand the local competitive environment for HE and the college's likely place within it;
- decide on a curriculum offer which is sustainable and which also meets student needs and expectations;
- achieve the right balance between HE and FE provision, avoiding 'mission drift';
- create an HE ethos and environment which is right for the college's staff and students;
- work with governors to establish performance benchmarks appropriate to HE;
- establish systems for managing data and finance which meet HEFCE/Office for Students and QAA needs;
- invest time, so that relationships with partner universities and other colleges can be managed in a positive manner;
- provide professional development opportunities to support the management and teaching of HE courses.

CHAPTER 7

NAVIGATING THE NEW LANDSCAPE

If you want something new, you have to stop doing something old.

Peter F. Drucker

In this chapter, we consider the prospects and place of CBHE in a more diverse and complex HE environment following passage of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017. One of the key aims of that legislation is to place students at the heart of the system, creating a new regulatory body in the form of the Office for Students which will preside over a more diverse range of providers and offer opportunities to a wider range of students. Access to degree-awarding powers will be streamlined, raising the possibility of more colleges seeking their own awarding powers and thus weakening the grip of universities as validating partners. Equally, it is possible that some of those validating institutions will lose their appetite for partnership-working and adopt a more competitive approach. Colleges may thus have to look for new solutions if they are to continue to offer HE. College leaders will be faced with new challenges but also with new opportunities.

In July 2016, the government published its Post-16 Skills Plan, aimed at implementing significant changes to the vocational educational system (to be renamed 'technical education') following the report of a panel chaired by Lord Sainsbury. In addition to proposals to introduce new T-levels at Level 3 to offer a real alternative to the established academic pathway of GCE A-levels, the report laid the foundations for a new type of 'higher technical' education at levels 4 and 5. This has stimulated debate around what distinction, if any, should exist between this new concept of 'higher technical' education post-Sainsbury and existing approaches to 'technical higher' education.

While, to some, this may appear an obscure question to pose, it lies at the heart of defining the college higher skills offer and the role for colleges in the new HE landscape. Colleges will clearly have to take the

reforms and resultant new qualifications seriously as they are planned to replace much existing provision at Level 3. Although the new T-levels are seen primarily as a pathway into employment, successful students will still have the opportunity to progress on to higher-level study, perhaps coupled with work or a Higher or Degree Apprenticeship. Higher technical qualifications will be designed to provide a direct means of doing so, offering routes to higher level qualifications in the same specialist pathways as those available at Level 3.

In previous chapters, we referred to UKCES and OECD reports³⁶ which describe the ongoing need for both higher-level professional and technical qualifications up to Level 5 and the advantages of using institutions other than universities offering bachelor degrees to deliver this provision. In the case of the former, FE colleges were said to be 'well placed to fill the gap (in higher level technical education) and should be supported to deliver higher-level technical provision alongside their wider offer'. Two-thirds of overall employment growth in the European Union will be in technicians and associate professionals, reflecting US projections that one-third of job vacancies in that economy will require some post-secondary qualification but less than a four-year degree (equivalent to an honours degree in the UK).³⁷ Most significant for the future of HE in FE, the OECD goes on to state: 'Short cycle (less than bachelor's level) professional education and training programmes have been most successful in institutions separate from conventional universities and with a separate funding stream'.³⁸

In England, the Sainsbury Report recommendations about Level 4 and 5 qualifications could be seen as a response to both sets of recommendations. Coupled with recent announcements about the creation of a small number of institutes of technology, to work alongside specialist national colleges, and the availability of funding through the apprenticeship levy, college leaders have an opportunity to set a new agenda for higher-level skills

³⁶ Ibid, UKCES and OECD.

³⁷ Carnevale, A.P., Smith, N. and Strohl, J. 2010. *Help wanted: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements through 2018*. Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

³⁸ OECD. 2014. *Skills beyond school: Synthesis report*. OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training. Paris, OECD Publishing.

While universities often espouse a regional, national or even international role, colleges are generally well-rooted in their local communities. They are also better able to meet the needs of small and medium-sized enterprises, often building on links made for lower-level provision to illustrate the business benefits of a more highly skilled workforce. With their local focus, LEPs should have an appreciation of the role for colleges in working with people already based in an area with no aspiration to live or work elsewhere but who are nonetheless vital to the success of those local and regional economies. Colleges thus need to reinforce their local role rather than succumb to the temptation of 'mission drift' towards becoming HEIs.

Institutes of technology, in their final form, will require the involvement of a university partner to give access to Level 6 provision and research expertise. This potentially makes it more difficult to address the challenges set out by the OECD and UKCES and risks repeating the error of giving universities a leading role for work in which they have little if any expertise. The obsession with the value of a bachelor's degree compared with a more focused technical qualifications continues to complicate the creation of a truly effective higher skills system. The same pattern appears to persist in other countries, including the United States, as identified by the Brookings Institution.³⁹ There is a need to establish a college brand for higher-level skills, emphasising relevance to the workplace and the positive impact on social mobility, especially at a local level. The challenge for college leaders is to convince policymakers that this route not only has benefits for individuals but is also fundamental to the success of businesses of all sizes.

Two further issues must be addressed by college leaders: ensuring the preparedness of staff to teach at higher level and the reward systems which may need to accompany this. Colleges will have to recruit highly skilled professionals, with expertise in their discipline, good teaching skills and familiarity with current industrial practice. Inevitably, these individuals will be in high demand in their parent industries, meaning

³⁹ Petrilli, M.J. 2016. *Not just college: Technical education as a pathway to the middle class*. Brookings Institution, Social Mobility Memos, 2 April 2016. See also Petrilli, M.J. (Ed). 2015. *Education for upward mobility*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

that colleges will have to compete for their services. Simply reflecting salary levels in these industries may stimulate debate in colleges as to how to achieve this without either directly or by implication giving the impression that other elements of the college's work at lower level are not considered to be of equal value. Extension of the 'Teach Too' approach, where individuals currently working in business and industry teach on a regular basis in colleges may present additional options. However, issues of salary will still arise, coupled with the need to ensure that the necessary levels of teaching expertise are developed and sustained.

The 2016 Student Academic Experience Survey conducted by the Higher Education Policy Institute found that 57 per cent of student respondents considered it 'very important' that academic staff had received specific training to teach. Interestingly, 47 per cent preferred teachers with industry or professional experience compared with only 26 per cent who regarded it as very important to be taught by active researchers.

The second and most important issue is the reaction of students to the opportunities offered by a more open and diverse HE landscape, with more choice but also potentially more risk. Students from neighbourhoods or socio-economic backgrounds where participation rates in HE have been historically low (and who are more likely to follow a Level 3 vocational course at a college) may become more sensitive to increasing debt, despite understanding that repayment only kicks in at a particular salary point. The student voice may, therefore, lead to better value for money or even more affordable course fees. Some colleges, or perhaps curriculum areas, will feel the impact of this new competitive drive before others. Larger conurbations will undoubtedly present an attractive market for such providers.

Value for money and a good student experience will remain central concerns for HE and are rightly unavoidable. Colleges will have to be clear about what distinguishes their offer from that of others. Higher levels of tutor and class contact hours, small class sizes affording a more familiar and supportive environment and a clear line of sight to careers and the workplace are the hallmarks of CBHE. Colleges can also build on

their local reputation to offer better opportunities to mature students or those in employment. Establishing a leading presence in niche markets such as these, rather than seeking to compete in the mainstream of HE delivery offers a fruitful way forward for CBHE.

The college HE offer and experience will be different from the mainstream. That does not mean it should in any way be seen as inferior or second choice, although that may be how it is portrayed by competitors. HE in FE is traditionally perceived to be at the end of a hierarchy of HE providers that has selective, research-intensive universities at the top. Teaching-only institutions that are unable to award their own degrees are not seen as having high status, resulting in many universities judging their success on research activity rather than employability.

This traditional view of HE ignores the current reality of an all-party interest in higher technical skills, greater devolution of skills funding to localities and a clearer link in the minds of students between investment in HE and longer-term career benefits.

The challenge for college leaders is to ensure that CBHE is recognised as different but not inferior. It expands choice both of subject and type of study, thus complementing and adding to what is currently available rather than competing with it. At its best, CBHE will attract students who might not otherwise see higher education as open to them.

If there is to be a revolution in the provision and uptake of higher-level skills in the college sector, college leaders will have to make it happen. To do so, they will need to find solutions to problems which, for many years, have appeared insoluble, including confirming the value of vocational and technical education when compared with more traditional approaches.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSIONS

*It doesn't matter whether a cat is black or white,
so long as it catches mice.*

Deng Xiaoqing

Significant changes will take place in HE across the next 10 years, affecting both prescribed and non-prescribed HE. The basic parameters have been set out in previous chapters: all-party support for the need to foster higher technical skills; the Sainsbury Review and the reform of technical education; the relaxation of existing constraints on degree-awarding powers; and a commitment to review the finance and funding of HE. All of these will happen within the context of a strong commitment to make the HE world more competitive. However, they will also take place in an economy where growth cannot be guaranteed and which faces the uncertainties posed by Brexit.

Any changes in HE are unlikely to be funded generously by government; despite acknowledging student concerns about debt, the prime sources of funding for HE will continue to be students and/or employers. Senior civil servants, their ministers and the Cabinet are well-known for their lack of familiarity with FE colleges in general and CBHE in particular (it is worth noting that at no point in the last 50 years has government defined the role of English FE colleges. It has been left to the sector to find and develop niches in the local and regional educational landscape. While this reactive approach can have benefits at local level, it creates difficulties in defining and describing the college role on a wider canvas. How, then, will college leaders deal with the impending but, as yet, undefined threats and opportunities surrounding HE?

Damian Page⁴⁰ suggests that principals must adopt a stance that mirrors their environmental context:

⁴⁰ Daley, M, Orr. K. and Petrie, J. 2017. *The principal: Power and Professionalism in FE*. London, UCL Institute of Education Press.

In times characterised by ferocity of competition, where colleges have become players within the commodified education marketplace, where the government imposes throttling systems of performativity, where the sector continues to be stripped of resources, there is no place for lambs; there is only a place for foxes and lions.

Ewart Keep, in a recent paper on the place of colleges in the localism agenda,⁴¹ notes the need to find time to step back from the day-to-day and confront more fundamental choices about mission, institutional skills and other strategic issues:

Colleges have been socialised into, and are extremely adept at, reacting to external stimuli in highly innovative and entrepreneurial ways, but may not be quite as proficient at carving out their own visions, priorities, and establishing the means to deliver these – either on their own or in partnership with others.

What should be the areas of focus for those leading CBHE? Like the American community colleges, English FE colleges are strongly associated with workforce development: this is their natural territory and is likely to be the base from which future decisions will develop. As government policies about skills and HE begin to merge, blurring the existing FE/HE divide, opportunities emerge for CBHE.

These same forces may, of course, encourage some universities to extend their mission and reach 'down' into areas of provision previously left to colleges, including even some provision at Level 3.

The lack of access to impartial careers information, advice and guidance has been noted by government education select committees and opposition spokespeople for many years. Little has been done to remedy matters. As adults face the need to work into their 60s and possibly 70s before reaching pensionable age, they will recognise the need to develop existing skills or re-skill completely. However, no agency is in

⁴¹ Keep, E. 2016. *The long-term implications of devolution and localism for FE in England*. London, AoC/FETL.

place to offer guidance at these critical points. The Futuretrack project undertaken by HECSU some years ago⁴² sums up the concerns of PT students in this regard:

- There is considerable demand for careers guidance among PT students which is not being met by university or college careers services
- PT students' reliance on their employers and colleagues for careers advice is of concern as this advice is unlikely to be impartial and may be informed by the organisation's short-term needs rather than the long-term needs of the student.
- However, careers services should also acknowledge that employers may be better informed than advisers when it comes to identifying specific opportunities in their particular field.

The project reported in 2009. Nine years on, the situation remains the same. Do colleges have a role to play in resolving this difficulty? Some do, on the basis that 'We're not just offering a course or a qualification, we're taking a holistic approach to our community's learning and employment opportunities' (FE college head of student services).

The changing shape of HE presents the opportunity to establish a clearly understood and accepted role for colleges in delivering distinctive higher education. At its best, this will not just be about continued competition for existing potential students: at its core should be about the creation of new routes into HE that will be attractive to individuals who might otherwise not participate. This is likely to be in vocational and technical areas where skills development and its impact in the workplace are valued most highly. This will include disciplines where universities may not have the subject knowledge or expertise or where costs of delivery favour the lower college cost base.

Throughout this paper, we have drawn attention to the fact that a large proportion of the college HE offer is at sub-degree level. It is perhaps unsurprising that universities whose core product is the three-year,

⁴² www.hecsu.ac.uk/futuretrack_part_time_students.htm

FT honours degree should have promoted that route as the best, if not the only, path to a higher qualification. However, it has already been demonstrated that employers in some sectors prefer sub-degree provision. And, indeed, until the removal of student number controls, students who did less well at Level 3, who sought a faster route into the workplace or who wanted to develop work-related professional or technical skills, often saw study up to Level 5 as their preferred option.

Ongoing concern at the cost of FT three-year degrees may result in more students seeking a route to HE which reduces the burden of debt while also enabling them to enter the workforce as soon as possible and with skills that employers value. This is also likely to appeal to mature students. Coupled with existing college strengths in delivering apprenticeships and catering for the needs of other PT students, there is a real prospect for colleges to make this part of the HE landscape their own. Linking Dearing's recommendations to the reality of an ageing workforce, and the government's need to develop a high-skill economy as cost-effectively as possible, offers a way forward for CBHE.

The aim is to produce highly skilled individuals capable of making a positive contribution in employment and in society as a whole. Higher education is no longer the preserve of universities and the three-year honours degree is not the only qualification of value. Colleges have the capacity and capability to create new and better opportunities up to Level 5, which respond to the demand from individuals and business for short-cycle, employment-facing provision. Colleges are well equipped to do this and should be given the greater role their efforts so far deserve.

Actions for college leaders

CBHE has gone through a period of sustained challenge and volatility. Despite this, college leaders have found new markets for their HE as well as innovative delivery approaches. The challenge now is to ensure that, as we enter yet another phase of reform, colleges have the capacity and ambition to extend their role creating new opportunities and engaging more students who would otherwise be denied the benefits of higher-level qualifications.

To make this a reality, college leaders, including senior managers and governors, should:

- be open to working in new ways and in new partnerships with employers, other colleges and independent providers, but with appropriate risk-management strategies;
- think outside the box of existing methods of course design and delivery, including working outside traditional college terms and making innovative use of new technologies, including social media;
- identify market opportunities best suited to the college offer, building on the strengths of the FE curriculum in areas such as Higher and Degree Apprenticeships;
- recognise that offering HE will make different and heavy demands on the college, which must be taken seriously and adequately resourced;
- be confident in obtaining degree-awarding powers and then using them imaginatively;
- work collaboratively to establish a clear identity for CBHE, focused on the sub-degree offer, responding to the needs of business and individuals for courses and qualifications with a direct line of sight to work and career development.

To cite this paper:

FETL (Further Education Trust for Leadership). 2017.
Higher Education in Further Education: Leading the Challenge.
FETL.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license. To view a copy of the license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>



M O N O G R A P H



MONOGRAPH 1

Published April 2018

The Further Education Trust for Leadership

Website: www.fetl.org.uk

Email: enquiries@fetl.org.uk

 [@FETforL](https://twitter.com/FETforL)