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Higher education in FE colleges

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Summary

The project is based on a study of the past, present and future of higher education in FE colleges in England, with reference to the changing policy context for this activity and the contemporary conditions for growth. Based on an analysis of secondary and statistical sources, the research has highlighted three key features in the development of higher education in FE colleges: the dual character of the policies, structures and processes relating to this provision; the weak information base guiding policy development in this area; and the legislative legacies and strategic uncertainties which surround decision-making in colleges.

Past: an arrested history

The growth of higher education in FE colleges is now at the centre of government policy to expand undergraduate education at levels below the first degree and to incorporate this provision as rungs in a new vocational ladder spanning compulsory and post-compulsory education. Although part of a long tradition of locally provided higher education, much of this activity has been hidden from history and policy, being eclipsed by the expansion of first-degree and postgraduate education since the 1960s and being overshadowed by the rise of the polytechnics and other large colleges as national institutions during the 1980s.

Legislative inheritance and policy inertia

Alongside this upward drift in the balance of higher education, the provision of 'sub-degree' education in the colleges has been differentiated in ways that have confused its identity on the one side and increased its complexity on the other. One source of this confusion has been legislative and terminological. Following the 1988 Education Act, higher education in further education was divided between that funded by the new funding council for the incorporated polytechnics and higher education colleges ('prescribed' higher education) and that which remained the funding responsibility of the local authorities ('non-prescribed' higher education). This separation was carried over into the 1992 legislation which created a unified higher education sector and a new, enlarged and incorporated sector of further education.

Under the 1988 Act and its administrative regulations, what was previously known as advanced further education was 'prescribed' in a schedule of courses which were funded nationally through the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council (PCFC) and then, after 1993, by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Prescribed courses included higher and first degrees, higher national diplomas, diplomas in higher education, diplomas in management studies and other advanced provision concerned, for example, with the training of teachers.

Non-prescribed courses comprised all provision previously classified as non-advanced further education (courses at or below the equivalent of GCE A-level) but included some advanced programmes which were omitted from the schedule, including higher national certificates, certificates in management studies and a wide range of awards validated by professional bodies. At the same time, there were examples of programmes – such as higher national diplomas – which did not transfer to the PCFC and which, like the provision of non-prescribed higher education, remained the funding responsibility of the local education authorities until 1993 when they passed to the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC).

For the FEFC, its inheritance of higher education courses was very much an anomalous and residual responsibility since the core mission of the sector was to expand participation and develop provision at the levels of further education. As a consequence, the FEFC operated a policy of 'no policy' in respect of its non-prescribed higher education and, after 1999, was content to transfer funding responsibility for a large portion of this provision to the HEFCE. Nevertheless, this still left a significant, if somewhat indeterminate, range of higher level vocational and professional courses with the FEFC and, in a similar manner as before, the new Learning and Skills Council (LSC) inherited responsibility for a level of work formally outside its remit.

These legislative legacies were reflected in the different quality assurance and data collection arrangements applied to prescribed and non-prescribed higher education. While both categories of provision continued to be subject to scrutiny by Her Majesty's Inspectorate after the 1988 Act, the creation of separate quality assurance regimes for higher education and further education following the 1992 legislation meant that: prescribed courses were assessed by the HEFCE and, from 1997, by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA); and non-prescribed courses of higher education were inspected by the FEFC. For FE colleges providing both categories of higher education provision, not only were they confronted with planning, funding and quality bodies operating on different bases and working to different schedules, they relied on the FEFC to transfer statistics on these courses and students to the Higher Education Statistics Agency. This transfer of data proved highly problematic and the central authorities have lacked a comprehensive, integrated and reliable source of statistical data to inform their understanding and planning of higher education in further education.

Mass higher education and capacity gain

Another source of differentiation and complexity was introduced by the sudden and rapid shift to mass higher education in England, especially the unplanned character of this growth. Not only were new institutions brought into cross-sector collaborative relationships, but, under more competitive and crowded conditions for higher education, these schemes increasingly involved colleges as providers of higher education courses rather than simply suppliers of qualified entrants for HE institutions.

Prior to this expansion, nearly all the higher education in the colleges was provided in their own name, albeit certificated, accredited or validated by external bodies. With the rapid growth of higher education at the end of the 1980s and the achievement of mass levels of participation for young people and adults in the 1990s, many colleges also entered into franchise relationships to teach undergraduate courses (in part or in whole) on behalf of partner HE institutions. For the latter, especially those recruiting to the limits of their existing capacity, this was an opportunity to expand student numbers as well as extend their local and regional accessibility. For the colleges, on the other hand, franchising was a way of increasing and diversifying their funding, developing their curriculum, enhancing teaching and professional development opportunities for their staff, and building new progression pathways for their students.

By 1994, when the government called a halt to further full-time expansion, around one in eight of all higher education students in England were studying in FE colleges, with close to a sixth of this number taught under franchise arrangements. However, without the addition of franchised students, the proportion of HE students taught in FE colleges would have fallen over this period, from 12% at the end of the 1980s to 10% when a policy of 'consolidation' was enforced during the middle of the 1990s. With most of their own HE courses offered part-time and leading to qualifications below the level of the first degree, FE colleges did not share in the high rates of growth associated with full-time first-degree education in HE institutions. In summary, the role taken by further education in the move to mass higher education was an auxiliary and ancillary one, preparing and qualifying a wider range of students for entry to higher education and, alongside its own undergraduate provision, easing the capacity problems experienced by the fastest growing HE establishments.

Present: a policy priority

Contemporary government policy for higher education in further education has its origins in five of the recommendations of the Dearing inquiry into higher education (1996–97): that renewed growth in higher education should be focused initially on the sub-degree levels; that priority in this growth should be accorded to FE colleges; that the bodies responsible for funding further and higher education should collaborate and fund projects designed to promote progression to higher education; that, in support of a local and regional role for higher education, the FEFC regional committees should include a member from higher education; and that quality assurance criteria for franchising arrangements should be specified which include a normal presumption that colleges should have only one HE partner.

The decision to give FE colleges a leading role in the renewed expansion of higher education was something of a surprise, not least because neither the FEFC nor the Kennedy committee on widening participation (1994–97) had viewed higher education as significant to the mission of further education. Moreover, the Dearing inquiry had itself taken an early decision not to broaden the scope of its review to include 'tertiary education' and consideration of higher education in further education escaped the serious examination in depth expected of such a key proposal.

In accepting these recommendations, but being less prescriptive about plural franchising than Dearing, the government and its agencies have since evolved a whole series of policy goals for further education in pursuit of short-cycle higher education.

A special mission

In line with the Dearing proposal that directly funded sub-degree higher education develop as 'a special mission' for FE colleges, the HEFCE has assumed funding responsibility for all postgraduate, first-degree, higher diploma and higher certificate courses in the colleges, and the government has planned for over half of the expansion in sub-degree places to be delivered through the colleges.

A collaborative mode

In order to deliver the same quality and standards of higher education as HE establishments, especially where the volume of undergraduate provision was small, colleges operating outside of regulated franchising arrangements have been encouraged to enter into collaboration or partnership with an HE institution (or other FE colleges) and thereby receive their funding through consortia composed of clusters of colleges and HE institutions in the same geographical area.

A widening participation role

Collaboration between HE establishments and FE colleges has also been promoted as a key element in strategies to widen participation in higher education, with the allocation of special funding to encourage HE institutions to build regional partnerships with colleges, both to extend participation and to enhance progression for students.

A new vocational ladder

As part of its rationalisation of qualifications, and to help overcome the historic divide between academic and vocational education, 'a new ladder of vocational progression' has been proposed from the intermediate through to the higher levels of vocational learning, with a key focus on foundation degrees built on partnerships between higher education, further education and employers.

A specialist vocational identity

Alongside their development as specialist vocational centres of excellence, one of the main objectives laid down for colleges was to provide 'a ladder of opportunity to higher education', with colleges expected to exploit the scope for further growth of higher education over the period to 2003–04 and, through consortia arrangements, to pool their expertise and resources with HE establishments.

Future: a continuing duality

Taken together, these initiatives represent a major set of policy purposes, yet they derive in large part from one sector (higher education) determining policy for another sector (further education), and their implementation has coincided with a structural reform excluding higher education from the remit of the LSC. In the 1999 White Paper which announced the setting-up of the LSC, two reasons were given for not giving this body direct funding responsibility for higher education. The first of these involved a claim to the uniqueness of higher education: its contribution was international and national as well as regional and local. Universities operated on a wider front than other institutions and therefore required a different approach to funding. The second justification was more pragmatic: to include higher education would undermine one of the main aims of the reform which was to bring order to an area already overly complex. Broadening this remit to embrace higher education would, it was stated, complicate this remit significantly.

With the numbers and proportions of HE students in further education already planned to grow in the short and medium term, and with colleges and universities actively encouraged to work together in consortia, the argument for exceptionalism was perhaps hardly convincing. The argument for reduced complexity and more order was equally perplexing. One of the ways in the which the funding councils in each sector sought to simplify their relationship was to transfer funding responsibility for all higher education to the HE sector. However, one unintended consequence of this transfer was to move a major source of complexity from one sector into another. Where previously the HEFCE was dealing with just 70 FE colleges, from the academic year 1999–00 it found itself funding over 200 such institutions. This number might increase again if the non-prescribed higher education remaining with the LSC is also assigned to the HEFCE. The review of these assorted higher level vocational and professional courses is expected to be completed by 2003 after which a decision will be taken about their future funding.

As a result of the recent transfer, responsibility for the quality assessment of first-degree, higher certificate and higher diploma provision in colleges passed to the QAA, adding considerably to the loading on the agency, especially with a new system of academic review planned to be introduced in England during the academic year 2001–02. Academic review was intended to streamline and integrate the subject assessment and institutional audit components of quality assurance in higher education, but it was unclear how this might impact on colleges since, unlike HE establishments, they were not subject to institutional audit by the QAA (although colleges were included in collaborative audit where they had entered into sub-contractual relationships with HE institutions).

While the planning and funding bodies for the HE and post-16 sectors were expected to work together on common areas of interest, the dual nature of policy and practice for higher education in further education has continued to pose severe difficulties and acute dilemmas for colleges reviewing their investment in this level of provision. Among the operational complexities and strategic uncertainties which inform future planning decisions are those which relate to at least five policy dimensions.

Coordination or separation?

Given the historical anomalies associated with the overlapping nature of higher education in further education, a clearer division of labour between the two sectors was likely to win some consent, especially in a new post-16 sector in which higher education was an even smaller percentage of the territory than in the former college sector. But the intention to focus a significant part of future HE growth on foundation degrees delivered in association with the colleges might call for strong forms of coordination between the sectors if a new framework for vocational progression was to be realised.

Concentration or dispersion?

In seeking to expand vocationally-orientated higher education in the colleges, there remain a raft of strategic questions to be addressed jointly by both sectors about where future growth should be located: on the 20 or so ‘mixed economy’ colleges which have long experience of higher level work; on the 300 or more colleges which teach smaller and sometimes fairly isolated pockets of higher education; or should expansion be focused only on those colleges recognised as specialist vocational centres of excellence?

Collaboration or competition?

The pursuit of collaboration as a means to increased efficiency, improved quality and broader participation has led to a growth and strengthening of regional partnerships, especially between HE institutions and FE colleges. But, where HE establishments were in danger of under-recruiting, warm relationships in collaborative schemes might quickly turn cold, especially if students were to carry larger funding premiums by virtue of their background or age.

Increasing or widening?

Both in the Dearing report and in subsequent statements by the government and the funding bodies there has been some ambiguity about the primary purpose of higher education offered by or in association with colleges of further education. Is such provision meant to stimulate new demand or steer current demand in new directions and, if collaboration between colleges and universities is a goal of policy, is this meant to increase, widen or deepen participation?

Light or heavy?

Under present arrangements, colleges offering higher education have to engage with planning, funding and quality regimes quite different from those in their own sector, each making separate demands and each operating on different cycles. But the future shape and scope of these processes remain unclear, especially in the case of academic review where, if universities with the highest scores were to be exempt from such exercises, the impact on colleges might involve a heavier rather than a lighter touch.

The growth of higher education in FE colleges is at the centre of government policy to expand undergraduate education at levels below the first degree and to incorporate this provision in a new vocational ladder spanning compulsory and post-compulsory education.

Drawing on a study of the past, present and future of higher education in FE colleges, this summary report examines the policy aims, operational complexities and strategic uncertainties which surround this area of activity. It analyses the wider context for decision-making in colleges and highlights the dual character of the policies, structures and processes relating to this provision. It will be useful to curriculum managers in further and higher education as well as policy officers in sector organisations and national bodies.

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