1 **Research methods teaching in vocational environments: developing critical engagement**
2 **with knowledge?**
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14 **Disclosure Statement**
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20
21 **Abstract**
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23   Knowledge of research methods is regarded as crucial for the UK economy and

24   workforce.   However, research methods teaching is viewed as a challenging

25   area for lecturers and students. The pedagogy of research methods teaching

26   within universities has been noted as underdeveloped; with undergraduate

27   students regularly expressing negative dispositions to the subject. These are

28   challenges documented in university-based HE, yet little is known of the

29   practices and pedagogies of research methods teaching in the college-based HE

30   setting, where the delivery of HE has grown in prominence in recent years.

31   Because college-based HE is widely regarded as primarily vocational,

32   incorporating research methods into curricula may be seen as an additional level

33   of complexity for staff to negotiate. In this paper we report on data collected

34   within a study to examine research methods teaching in Social Science

35   disciplines on HE programmes taught in college-based settings in England.

36   Drawing on data obtained from college-based HE lecturers and students we

37   discuss features of research methods teaching and how these may be applied

38   with a diverse student body, within vocationally-focused institutions. Issues of

39   institutional culture, resourcing and staff development are also considered as

40   these are identified as integral to the successful embedding of research methods

41   teaching.

42

43   **Keywords**: Widening participation, Foundation degrees; research-based curricula; HE

44   in FE

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48   **Introduction**

49   Further education (FE) colleges in England have had a longstanding commitment to the

50   provision of higher education (HE) (Parry 2009). This provision offered is largely perceived

51   as fulfilling a particular remit: primarily vocational, work-based and employer led, reflecting

52   the established position of colleges as preparing students for the local economy and having

53   close links with employers (Bathmaker and Avis 2005). Given this, it is often assumed that

54   the students studying within FE colleges are doing this alongside other commitments and are

55   predominantly part-time learners (HEFCE 2006). College HE students have also been

56   described as less academically integrated (Crozier, Ray and Clayton 2010). Additionally, the

57   long tradition of sub-degree level qualifications means that colleges HE provision is often

58   perceived as restricted to this level. However, HE in colleges has become more diverse as a

59   consequence of successive government policies regarding the accessibility and funding of HE

60   (Parry 2006).

61

62   FE colleges were placed at the forefront of HE expansion following the Dearing Report

63   (Dearing 1997) and the following white paper *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES 2003).

64   These acknowledged the unique position of FE colleges with respect to their links with

65   communities and employers, and therefore were viewed as ideally positioned to take forward

66   agendas around Widening Participation, Lifelong Learning and increased participation in HE

67   (Parry 2010; Blunkett 2000). This triggered a period of growth (Parry 2009), which was

68   supported by favourable public funding, and supported via organisations such as the Higher

69   Education Academy (HEA), Foundation Degree Forward, and the Association of Colleges.

70   Policymakers were keen to address concerns that the Higher National Diplomas / Certificates

71   had fallen out of favour with employers and that enrolments on these programmes were in

72   decline (DfEE 2000). A new qualification was perceived as a means of redressing this

73   balance (DfES 2003) and creating a bridge for articulation onto honours degrees' (Robertson

74 2002). Foundation Degrees (FD) were identified by HEFCE as connecting the academic-

75 vocational divide between universities and colleges (HEFCE 2002). FDs built on the

76 traditional FE values of work-based learning and employer engagement, but were designed to

77 develop students' academic knowledge further (Parry, Blackie and Thompson 2009). This

78 was recommended firstly through the provision of the environment and resources

79 'appropriate' for HE study (Parry et al. 2009), but also, and more crucially, lecturing staff

80 embracing pedagogies of HE teaching e.g. research informed teaching, problem-based

81 learning and research-based curricula (QAA 2010). Secondly, completion of the FD

82 represented an entry route into a full honours degree as students were presented with the

83 opportunity of 'topping up' through their validating partner (Parry et al. 2009). The role of

84 universities as providers of FDs as well as partners to colleges in validation arrangements was

85 central to this initiative.

86

87 This presents a somewhat simplified picture of what has become a hugely complex area

88 (Parry 2009). In this paper we examine research methods teaching as one particular aspect in

89 the provision of HE in FE, an area which has yet to be widely considered (Burton and

90 Schofield 2011). Studies examining the experiences of non-traditional students, such as those

91 associated with college-based HE, have observed the impact of diverse entry profiles on

92 retention and achievement, with lecturers noting that supporting students 'learning how to

93 learn' is essential (Leese 2010). This issue crystallises around research methods teaching

94 which can be a difficult subject for students (of any level) to grasp (Benson and Blackman

95 2003). Indeed, for those progressing on to 'top up', the social and academic challenges

96 associated with the transition from the college to the university have been reported

97 (Greenbank 2007), but also difficulties completing a dissertation as part of the honours

98 component of their studies (Tait and Godfrey 2001). HE pedagogies, particularly research

99 methods teaching, which can emphasise independent study, are sometimes seen as at odds

100 with FE practices which are ingrained within the college (Bathmaker et al. 2008). Therefore

101 research methods teaching, and the pedagogies associated with its teaching, have crept up the

102 agenda of college-based HE (Burton and Schofield 2011). This agenda is also usefully

103 viewed from the perspective of how critical engagement with knowledge is employed within

104 an environment that some have argued is increasingly defined as 'teaching only' (Esmond

105 2012). Drawing on qualitative and quantitative data collected from college-based students

106 and staff using a range of methods, we consider the issues and challenges associated with

107 research methods teaching in English FE colleges.

Research methods teaching within the HE curriculum

We feel it is important to frame our study in the context of research methods teaching

with regards to university-based HE, as this is an important reference point on which

college-based HE lecturers can draw. Arguably, scholarship is what makes HE unique

and separates it from other levels of education (Lea and Simmons 2012). Through

scholarship students become active participants in their learning; they go beyond

acquiring knowledge to shaping it, developing criticality, becoming analytical and

moving toward independence in their learning (Lea, 2014). As the quotation below

suggests, by engaging in scholarship students can develop skills and expertise

important to their future careers:

> Teaching students to be enquiring or research-based in their approach is not just
> a throwback to quaint notions of enlightenment or liberal education but central
> to the hard-nosed skills required of the future graduate workforce (Jenkins,
> Healey and Zetter 2007: 3).

A number of different approaches have been used to promote the integration of scholarship

and scholarly practice into HE teaching. Healey, Jenkins and others have written about the

benefits of encouraging students to be more scholarly, advocating the use of inquiry-based

learning and promoting curriculum design that see students undertaking research as part of

their everyday studies (Jenkins and Healey 2005; Healey and Jenkins 2009). However, the

extent to which these pedagogies have been adopted is variable (Wagner, Garner, and

Kawulich 2011). This is partly due to the limited recognition gained for those who go

beyond the standard practice of including contemporary knowledge in their teaching (Healey

2000) but more widely there is evidence of inadequacies in the training of those responsible

for teaching research skills (MacInnes 2010; British Academy 2012). If this is an area for

concern for university-based HE lecturers, as we will go on to consider, the implications of

this situation could be significant for college-based HE lecturers.

Research methods teaching has therefore become a site of contention. Although the benefits

of integrating research methods teaching into curriculum are firmly established, rarely does

this happen (MacInnes 2010; Rice et al. 2001). Frequently research methods are taught as

standalone modules to large cohorts of students in preparation for their dissertations (Benson

142 and Blackman 2003). Teaching research methods in this way creates a false perception of
143 research methods equating to a technical skill, particularly with respect to quantitative
144 research method (Benson and Blackman 2003; MacInnes 2012). Students taught using this
145 approach demonstrate limited awareness of the relevance of research methods to other
146 aspects of their degree programmes, creating future problems when required to apply this
147 knowledge in the workplace (MacInnes 2012). This has been recorded as been particularly
148 acute with social science graduates (Rice et al. 2001). A further consequence of standalone
149 delivery was exemplified by a study which examined the teaching and learning of this subject
150 with Sociology students. They demonstrated resistance to learning about research methods,
151 particularly quantitative data, although the use of quantitative research methods had been
152 widespread in the degree as a whole (Williams, Collett and Rice 2004). Similar studies have
153 recorded a preference amongst students to write essays rather than analyse data, highlighting
154 factors such as disinterest, anxiety and a lack of confidence with respect to the use and
155 analysis of quantitative research methods (MacInnes 2012; Williams et al. 2008; Shober et al.
156 2006).

157

158 **Research methods in college-based HE**
159 The situation surrounding research methods teaching in universities has been described as
160 representing the cultural marginalisation of the subject within the social sciences (MacInnes
161 2010, 16). It is important to be aware of this when examining the teaching of research
162 methods in college-based HE. Colleges are frequently described as centres of teaching and
163 vocational education, where primary research is generally associated with the advancement
164 of knowledge within a university context, and referenced by students in support if their
165 studies (Child 2009). Research, therefore, is not an activity widely engaged with by FE
166 lecturers. Studies have examined the challenges for those staff wishing to become research
167 active in support of their HE teaching, with the challenges lecturers face been widely
168 documented (Turner et al. 2009; Young 2002; Anderson et al. 2003). However, although
169 Child (2009) and others make reference to student engagement with 'research' little is known
170 regarding the form of this research, how and where it takes place and the contribution it
171 makes to students development.

172

173 As in university-based HE, curriculum space is restricted; indeed, curriculum space in the FD
174 is pressured given the diverse entry profiles of students which mean they often need support
175 in developing their study skills, the academic-vocational crossover, and the dual end points of

176   employment or further study (QAA 2010). The majority of FD graduates progress on to

177   further study; the 2012-13 Destination of Leavers from HE data indicated that whilst only

178   14% of graduates from a full degree engaged in further study following graduation, 48% of

179   FD students moved on to higher study (HESA 2014). Therefore there is a clear requirement

180   for FD providers to prepare students for 'topping up,' as well as offering sufficient support

181   for those with a desire to move directly into the workplace. Part of this preparation will

182   include developing their knowledge of research methods to support dissertation level work.

183

184   The vocational focus of colleges could represent an additional pressure impact on the

185   allocation of curriculum space to research methods (Bathmaker 2013; Lea and Simmons

186   2012). Vocational education, and therefore the knowledge base it draws upon, is based on a

187   discourse of workplace readiness with the emphasis placed upon the development of skills

188   rather than knowledge (Bathmaker 2013). These 'skills' can be interpreted as representing

189   (measureable) abilities relating to activities such as communication, numeracy, computer

190   literacy, and to a range of interpersonal or generic attributes that can be transferred to a

191   number of professional contexts (DfCSF 2009). Recent research (e.g. Bathmaker, 2013;

192   Guile, 2010) has again acknowledged the importance of theoretical knowledge within the

193   sphere of vocational education. In the context of vocational education, theoretical knowledge

194   is contested; it is commonly referred to as abstract and perceived as removed from the skills

195   focus of many FE colleges (Bathmaker 2013; Doyle 2003). Theoretical knowledge underpins

196   the appropriate application of research methods and analysis of resulting data, therefore

197   explicit consideration of the theoretical foundations of research is essential. However, little is

198   known as to how this aspect of research methods training is addressed in college-based HE,

199   and given the concerns of Bathmaker (2013) and Doyle (2003) this is an area that warrants

200   further attention.

201

202   Critical engagement with knowledge, and critical thinking, are skills integral to higher

203   education (Lea 2014). They relate to students abilities to solve problems and address

204   questions or challenges. It goes beyond the simple acquisition of facts to decision making,

205   experimentation, evaluation, integration and synthesis, all skills that are employed in

206   research, and therefore fundamental to the teaching of research methods (Lea 2014; Rippen et

207   al. 2002). As we will go on to explore, these are skills that can be difficult for students to

208   comprehend and develop as students can perceive them as abstract and they need to be

209 supported by pedagogic techniques that stimulate higher-level learning (Jenkins & Healey

210 2005).

212 A further consideration is the background of college-based HE lecturers. Commonly college-

213 based HE lecturers have a diverse professional profile, in that they entered teaching from

214 employment, with their professional knowledge and skills leading to them securing a

215 teaching role in a college (Turner et al. 2009). Progression into HE teaching is a consequence

216 of 'circumstances' in many cases (Turner et al. 2009). This means that the base on which

217 they develop their HE teaching may be largely informed by their FE experiences, and, as

218 noted above, given the low profile of research in colleges, the opportunities for HE lecturers

219 to develop their knowledge of this area can be restricted.

221 Based on the evidence presented above, the position of research methods teaching in college-

222 based HE varies widely. In some colleges the role of research methods teaching could be

223 emergent, whereas in others it may be contested and in others, firmly established. By

224 undertaking this national level study we sought to provide insights into the situation

225 regarding research methods teaching and learning in English FE colleges and the experiences

226 of both staff and students in engaging with this part of the curriculum. Questions on the

227 critical engagement with knowledge, institutional support for research and scholarship and

228 the dual sector remits of vocational and academic education in the college environment are

229 integral to this study.

231 **Methodology**

232 Following an in-depth review of literature relating to research methods and pedagogies of

233 research methods teaching two questionnaires were designed, one for completion by students

234 and a second to be completed by lecturers involved in teaching research methods and

235 programme leads. Each questionnaire captured demographic information (e.g. gender, age).

236 The student questionnaire was split into five sections. Through section one contextual

237 information (e.g. college name, programme studying, level / mode of study, background

238 qualifications) were collected. In section two we used a four-point Likert scale (strongly

239 agree to strongly disagree, with an additional opt out category) to capture students reactions

240 to a number of statements regarding different research methods potentially encountered

241 during their studies. Section three used a series of yes / no response questions to gauge

242 students' awareness of methodological concepts. Next we explored preferred methods of

243   learning about research methods and the resources (e.g. library / software) available to
244   support their learning. Finally we captured their confidence in undertaking both qualitative
245   and quantitative research using a 10 point scale. The staff questionnaire again captured
246   contextual information (e.g. role, proportion of teaching at HE level, disciplinary area),
247   section two explored the delivery of research methods teaching and assessment, section three
248   used a four-point Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree, with an additional opt out
249   category) to examine their knowledge and confidence in teaching research methods. Finally
250   we explored the resources available to support their teaching and also engage with / develop
251   their capacity as researchers. In this final section several open questions were included which
252   sought to capture further information to inform the second stage of data collection.

253

254   Each questionnaire was piloted with further refinements made as a result of feedback. The
255   questionnaires were administered using Survey Monkey and available for completion
256   between the 8th March and 14th April 2013. In order to gain insights into research methods
257   teaching across college-based HE in England, we distributed the surveys extensively through
258   partnership email lists in the South and North West and via groupings such as the Association
259   for Collaborative Provision of Higher Education in England, the Staff and Educational
260   Development Association, Universities Council for the Education of Teachers HE in FE
261   group and the college-based HE mailing lists of the HEA. As the organisation and role of
262   college-based HE varies across the four nations of the UK (Gallacher et al., 2006), we took
263   the decision to focus specifically on provision in England. Although this may be seen as
264   geographically limiting the scope of the study, it provides congruence with the organisational
265   parameters of education policy in England.

266

267   A total of 162 respondents were yielded from the lecturer questionnaire and 127 respondents
268   for the student survey. Whilst we acknowledge this is a small response rate for the student
269   survey, given the short timeframe over which the survey was open, and also the provisional
270   nature of this study we felt this was sufficient to provide initial insights into this under
271   researched area. Student response rates to on-line surveys are lower, even when incentivised,
272   than paper-based surveys (Nulty, 2008). However, on-line administration does have clear
273   advantages with respect to reaching diverse sample populations and broad geographic
274   coverage. With respect to the staff survey, again, the overall size of the sample population is
275   not known, but in 2011 the HEA had approximately 1,000 managers, lecturers and support
276   staff registered on its national college-based HE mailing list (Outram, pers. comm.) therefore

277   if we use this a guide, we have a response rate that aligns with comparable studies in this area

278   (e.g. Brew et al., 2011).

279

280   The disciplinary groupings designated by the HEA were used to identify respondents from

281   the social sciences. Qualitative responses were analysed thematically with members of the

282   research team independently reviewing data, developing codes and then coming back

283   together to refine these (Silverman 2011). The outcomes of this analysis formed the basis of

284   two focus groups, which were used to corroborate findings emerging from the questionnaire

285   around research methods teaching, training and staff development in support of research /

286   research methods teaching and allow greater exploration of these findings with college-based

287   HE practitioners (Silverman 2011). Nine participants for the focus groups were purposefully

288   selected from those who volunteered to contribute further to the research following

289   completion of the questionnaire. We selected participants to encompass a range of social

290   science disciplines and ensured we included those in lecturing and management positions.

291   The focus groups were held in two different locations in order to maximise participation and

292   ensure we gained representation from a range of college-based HE providers. Each focus

293   group lasted for approximately one hour and was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and

294   subsequently analysed using the same approach as the qualitative questionnaire responses.

295   The message wall was implemented as a response to many staff expressing interest in the

296   project but being unable to participate in focus groups. In total, 17 participants engaged with

297   the message wall discussions which ran from May until June. In reporting these data we

298   indicate the source using the following coding: QU – questionnaire, FG – focus group and

299   MW – message wall.

300

301   **Results**

302   **College-based HE lecturer responses**

303   *Profile of respondents*

304   College-based HE is hugely variable in size; HEFCE (2003) guidance sought to

305   accommodate this by suggesting the development of infrastructure and resources to support

306   HE teaching should be informed by the presence of a 'critical mass' of HE provision. Given

307   that we obtained responses from lecturers employed at 55 colleges, and obtained their college

308   name, we were able to examine the pedagogies and resourcing of research methods teaching

309   with respect to college size. We drew on data compiled by HEFCE using HESA and ILR

310   records, an approach used in similar studies (e.g. Parry et al. 2012) to categorise college size

311 according to HE student numbers. Respondents were then attributed to one of the following

312 categories: 1000+, 500-999 and 1-499 (Table 1).

313

314 [Place Table 1 here]

315

316 As discussed, many college lecturers enter teaching from what could be referred to as a non-

317 traditional route. Considerable time may have passed since they themselves undertook their

318 own undergraduate studies / conducted any research. Therefore the currency of their

319 knowledge regarding research methods, and also more recently the software developed to

320 support research activities, may be variable (Turner et al. 2009). The majority of our

321 respondents fall in the 40-49 and 50-59 age categories (Table 2) therefore there is the strong

322 likelihood that staff development is necessary to ensure currency in their knowledge and

323 pedagogic practice. This issue is explored in further detail below.

324

325 [Place Table 2 here]

326

327 ***Research methods teaching***

328 Respondents were presented with a comprehensive list of 'subjects' that could be taught in

329 order to develop students' knowledge and competencies with research methods (Table 3). It

330 is noteworthy that lecturers concentrated on 'literature searching' and 'qualitative research

331 methods' with 'reporting research', 'quantitative research methods' and 'research paradigms'

332 receiving least attention (Table 3). This was not unanticipated, in a limited curriculum space

333 which is expected to incorporate a vocational dimension; these theoretically driven aspects of

334 curriculum are likely culprits for elimination. But it is likely to have implications for the

335 development of higher-level, problem solving which is based on skills such as integrating,

336 synthesising and evaluating knowledge and data to reach conclusions. Literature searching

337 and qualitative research methods were perceived as more palatable aspect of research

338 methods teaching which can be integrated amidst a framework for wider academic skill

339 development. Indeed, this was a theme emerging from the qualitative data:

340

341   'Research methods is "just another skill" but combines so many other areas of

342   overlapping skills, experience and knowledge. The reading of books (or not!) is my

343   major concern.' MB

344

345 Only 43.8% of respondents' include 'research paradigms' in their teaching. Research

346 paradigms represent the foundational knowledge upon which methodological and analytical

347 decisions should be made (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2009). Its limited coverage could mean

348 that students are only developing a partial awareness of the research process and may be, if

349 progressing to 'top up' their FD, lack the conceptual knowledge on which to defend their

350 research. Focus group respondents were aware of this position and clearly struggled to

351 reconcile this:

352

353   'I don't think they're ready for it because I'm trying to get mine to try and work out

354   why they've done that project, where their values, where their beliefs come from, and

355   that's about as far as we can go. And some of them can question it and then they can

356   start to look at their assumptions and how that may impact on the research. That, at

357   level five, I'm finding for my students anyway, that's probably as far as we can take it

358   because I don't think they're ready for it.' FG

359

360 It may also be a consequence of the skills-knowledge debate, which, as discussed above, has

361 seen FE colleges adopt a vocational focus to their teaching to the detriment of theoretical

362 aspects of the curriculum. Indeed, this is intimated at with respect to student engagement

363 with this subject:

364

365   'I think it's, I would say it's to do with linking to what matters to them. If you can get

366   them to see the relevance to what they are core interested in then they catch. If that's

367   not possible then they shut off against it and it takes a long time to get back in to it.'

368   FG

369

370 A deficit in research methods teaching has been discussed with respect to the teaching of

371 research methods in university-based provision (e.g. MacInnes 2012; British Academy 2012).

372 We have also considered the challenges of negative student attitudes and anxiety leading to

373 resistance amongst students to learning about this subject (Williams et al. 2008). Although

374 'reporting research' was included, only 46.6% of respondents taught this with respect to

375 'literature searching' (which 76.5% taught). To a certain extent there is an overlap in some of

376 the skills drawn upon (e.g. formulating arguments, synthesising literature) in both literature

377 searching and reporting research, but the problem solving and critical thinking with respect to

378 analysing data and solving problems that are also required in the reporting of research will be

379 overlooked if curriculum time is concentrating on literature searching (Table 3). A number

380 of issues could be influencing the breadth of research methods integrated into college-based

381 HE curricula. It could indicate the lack of familiarity generally with this aspect of the

382 research process as studies (Anderson et al. 2003; Schofiled and Burton 2013) have

383 documented a general lack of confidence and knowledge surrounding the reporting and

384 dissemination of research outcomes for college-based lecturers seeking to become research

385 active. However, data gathered which sought to examine whether respondents had sufficient

386 knowledge to teach these aspects of research methods indicates that they felt they did (Table

387 4). This is clearly a complex issue, and, as we will go on to discusses, issues of currency of

388 knowledge, curriculum space and student profiles may also be influencing practice in this

389 area.

390

391 [Place Table 3 here]

392

393 [Place Table 4 here]

394

395 Following on from this it is useful to consider the format and pedagogy of research methods

396 teaching (Tables 5 and 6). Research methods are most commonly taught as programme

397 specific lectures, through 1:1 tutorials, in small groups or as workshops, although as Table 7

398 indicates there may be some variation with respect to college size. This format of teaching

399 supports the pedagogies respondents identified as commonly using e.g. independent study,

400 practical exercises and project / problem-based learning (Table 5). Both the format of

401 teaching and pedagogies employed are in line with those cited as promoting student

402 engagement and building their confidence with this subject (e.g. Benson and Blackman,

403 2003). In contrast to universities, college-based research methods provision appears to be

404 more programme-specific, integrated into wider teaching and learning activities, as indicated

405 through the use of approaches such as practical exercises and problem-based learning. The

406 importance of this was also considered in the focus group:

407

408   'I know on our foundation degree programmes the research skills, which is a level

409   four module, was originally taught lecture style to all of the students all together and

410   supported in tutorials by staff members in their specialism area. But they came from a

411   huge disparity of foundation degrees to come together to be delivered that, and it

412   wasn't necessarily for the benefit of the student, but it was definitely beneficial for the

12

413   bottom line. Actually that has changed recently; we've gone to a more specialist

414   model.' FG

415 Such integration follows the recommendations of the British Academy (2012) and MacInnes

416 (2012) with respect to ensuring students understand both the context and application of

417 research methods, and evidence is emerging of this taking place with respect to research

418 methods been taught as part of themes central to the FD (e.g. work-based learning, employer

419 engagement):

420

421   'The Work Based Learning Unit involves submitting a proposal for one of the design

422   aspects of a sustainable building. Once the proposal has been agreed with the client /

423   employer and tutor the assignment will require research and analysis to be carried out

424   for the design aspect involved and the submission of a report on the conclusions and

425   recommendations proposed.' QU

426

427 As the next extract indicates, the primary consideration of the research project is vocational

428 relevance:

429

430   'Students are required to propose and complete a research project that is vocationally

431   relevant'. QU

432

433 This extract is indicative of the focus on vocational or work-based learning as a driver

434 underpinning research methods teaching, which is evident throughout the data. When

435 combined with data relating to aspects of research methods taught/not taught (Table 3), a

436 pattern emerges of a model of teaching that is primarily packaged as developing skills for

437 vocational tasks. This approach aligns with the requirements of FDs and ensures shared

438 curriculum space for meeting FD benchmarks, as well as the pedagogic impetus for delivery.

439 This observation needs to be framed alongside the non-traditional profile of FD students, and

440 the potential implications this can have with respect to students needing to learn how to learn,

441 again an issue raised within the focus groups:

442

443   'I think, for the purpose for foundation degrees within the courses that I teach on or

444   have taught on, the actual process of research they don't get there yet. So we do,

445   particularly in the early years foundation degree, one of the modules is about teaching

446   research methods rather than actually doing it, because they're not there yet.' FG

447   Indeed many of the pedagogies listed in Table 6 are widely used in colleges as they are seen

448   as that supporting students' academic development as a whole (Turner et al., 2009). These

449   data have already indicated that the breadth of research methods teaching may be somewhat

450   limited, so whilst colleges may be employing pedagogies conducive to research methods

451   teaching, this finding needs to be considered alongside the limitations identified (Table 3) and

452   the profile of the student body.

453

454   [Place Table 5 here]

455   [Place Table 6 here]

456   [Place Table 7 here]

457

458   *Engaging students with research methods teaching*

459   Similar to university-based students, our data indicate engaging students with research

460   methods teaching is challenging. Although the quantitative data demonstrate that 59.5% of

461   respondents find it easy or very easy to engage students in research methods teaching when

462   related to real life scenarios (Table 8), respondents found it more difficult to engage them

463   (Table 9) when framed in terms of progression or future career development. This reinforces

464   the challenges noted around student attitudes and engagement with research methods in

465   university-based HE (e.g. McInnes, 2012; Williams et al., 2008). This is supported through

466   the qualitative data, where examples were recorded of students questioning the relevance of

467   research methods teaching, and also examples of lecturers trying to integrate research

468   methods to real-life scenarios to promote perceived relevance:

469

470   'There's so many transferable skills there and that's how I sell it. So I get a […] why

471   do I have to do research, because it's [a] core module, so I sell the transferable skills

472   now, researching, in the literature being sent. I just find it quite hard, I don't know

473   about you, hard to sell it as a module, "Why do we have to do this as a core

474   module?"' FG

475   'Legal research is essential, so the inclusion of primary legal sources is essential for

476   all law modules. In Year 1 an initial Skills Assessment assesses students' ability in

477   finding and using primary legal sources, and in Year 2 students undertake an extended

478   essay on a subject of their choice. The project proposal, literature review and final

479   essay all illustrate the depth/extent of research skills.' QU

480

481 [Place Table 8 here]

482 [Place Table 9 here]

483

484 The issue of student engagement aligns with the challenges identified in university settings.

485 For colleges, who focus on meeting vocational FD requirements, we argue that there is a

486 strategy employed in using this as a focus of research methods teaching. However, despite the

487 generally positive attitudes towards research methods based on real-life and professional

488 contexts, (Tables 8 and 9) there seems to be a sizable minority who still find difficulty in

489 using the vocational levers as a stimulus:

490

491   'The idea is for them to be enthusiastic about the topic, to want to, to be, I can't

492   motivate them if I give them a question and they hate me for the year […]. They've

493   got, and they don't like it, to actually go, "What do I want to research?" Well, this is

494   almost catch 22, isn't it?' FG

495

496 It would seem that the problems of student engagement cannot be easily remedied through

497 vocational alignment of research projects despite assumptions that this is the primary

498 motivator for college-based HE students. Perhaps the limited student engagement with

499 research projects aligned to so-called 'real life scenarios' reflects the breadth of college-based

500 HE. College-based HE is widely perceived to be vocationally orientated, with students

501 working toward achieving a higher-level qualification as part of professional training or

502 preparation (Stanton, 2009). There is no natural home for research in this environment, hence

503 the tendency to package research methods and subsequent research projects as skills based

504 around vocational settings. However, recent research demonstrated that attitudes towards

505 students' choice of HE provider are changing (HEFCE, 2013). Increasingly decisions are

506 made based on costs, with factors such as proximity and ability to balance wider

507 responsibilities, making the college-based HE option more attractive to a wider proportion of

508 students (Prospects, 2010). In some geographic locations (e.g. rural areas) college-based HE

509 may be the only option as illustrated by the trend for the comparative growth of full-time HE

510 programmes in colleges (Gray and Stone, 2014). Consequently, the remit of many college-

based HE providers has extended to include FDs that are aligned more explicitly to a specific discipline rather than been vocationally orientated.   In these instances adopting an employer-focused research project or implementing research methods activities aligned to 'real-life scenarios' may have a mixed reception from students. More widely the diverse entry profile of students means that the extent to which they are confident in engaging with research methods provision is also highly variable.

There is no easy solution to engaging students with research methods teaching, with careful consideration of the student profile, the focus of the FD, connections to vocational and disciplinary traditions and students ambitions following graduation with respect to further study or entry to the work place, all factors those responsible for teaching research methods should heed. The advantage, as discussed here, for much college-based research methods teaching is that small group / programme specific activities provides staff with the opportunity to cater for individual students. The challenge is in equipping staff with the appropriate professional updating opportunities to facilitate this for their learners.

Research capabilities of college-based HE lecturers

The relationship between research and teaching within universities is an issue that has received considerable attention (Brew and Boud 1995; Healey 2000). Although sought after, researchers have been unable to provide an unequivocal link between research activity and teaching quality (Brew and Boud 1995). However, for the college-based HE lecturer a link between research activity and teaching is one that needs further consideration, particularly with respect to the integration of research methods into their teaching and ensuring the currency of lecturers' pedagogic practice.

Reference has already been made to the low level of research activity that takes place within FE colleges, a situation mirrored by our respondents (Table 10).   Higher study (e.g. masters / PhDs) was identified as an important avenue for many to access research. But even when funding was forthcoming, respondents were reliant on their own motivation and time to undertake this work. Work which many felt was vital to the currency of their practice and central to their teaching of research methods:

  'But it is done in our own time, rather than considered an essential part of delivering
   HE qualifications.' QU

'OK if supported by training and development but a lack of depth within area alongside a deficit in updating and development and hands-on research experience can present a weakness in research methods teaching.' QU

'Research methods can be difficult enough [...] without the added pressure of staff members having no recent experience to draw on.' MW

[Place Table 10 here]

The lack of institutional support, recognition, a culture of discussion / ideas sharing and also a lack of knowledge about the research process (e.g. applying for funding, disseminating research outcomes) were challenges reported by respondents. Indeed, these are barriers discussed elsewhere as hindering the development of research and scholarship in colleges (Anderson et al. 2003; Turner et al. 2009). High teaching loads confound this situation, as many FE lecturers are contracted to teach in excess of 800 hours per academic year (Lea and Simmons 2012). Although HEFCE (2009) advocated the use of arrangements with a college's validating partner as a potential way of stimulating the development of scholarship and research activity through the mutual exchange of ideas and expertise, as Tables 11 demonstrates, the majority of respondents were not provided with such opportunities. Given the lack of expertise within colleges and the limited opportunities provided through their validating partner, this raises a potentially alarming issue regarding how college-based HE lecturers can enhance their knowledge of research and scholarship, not only in support of research methods teaching but also in support of their HE teaching more generally. This issue needs to be considered alongside the finding that 99% of respondents either strongly agreed (69.7%) or agreed (29.4%) that their knowledge in research methods was gained through their own qualifications (Table 12). Similarly, 81.9% strongly agreed or agreed that they gained this knowledge through their own professional training, and 94% through their own practical experiences. As we intimated earlier, the age profile of our respondents (Table 2) indicates, that for the majority, it may have been sometime since they completed their own studies, and had first-hand experience of undertaking research. Therefore it is not only in universities where the development and training opportunities for research methods teaching appear to be lacking (MacInnes 2010), clearly in college-based HE there is an urgent need to also address this issue.

578

579 [Place Table 11 here]

580 [Place Table 12 here]

581

582 **College-based HE student responses**

583 *Profile of respondents*

584 In contrast to the prevailing perception of college-based HE students studying part-time

585 (HEFCE, 2009) the majority of respondents identified themselves as undertaking their studies

586 full time (Table 13). This is a pattern that has been noted in similar studies (e.g. Gray and

587 Stone 2014), and whilst not the focus of the current study does raise some questions that

588 warrant further investigation regarding the profile of students undertaking FDs, and what has

589 caused this shift in the modes of study.

590

591 [Place Table 13 here]

592

593 Whilst most respondents were studying at levels 4 and 5 (Table 13), some are studying at

594 level 6, (the final years of honours study) and a minority studying at level 7 (postgraduate).

595 Further analysis of these respondents indicated that they were registered on courses relating

596 to teacher training.   Whilst it was expected that most respondents would by studying FDs the

597 presence of level 6 respondents may be indicative of the growth of provision at this level

598 following the Browne Review. Although representing a limited number of respondents, their

599 presence further warrants the need for development of college-based HE lecturers with

600 respect to teaching and supporting research as students studying at this level are likely to be

601 required to complete independent research as part of their studies.

602

603 [Place Table 14 here]

604

605 Indeed further evidence emerged regarding this issue through questioning around the

606 software packages students used to analyse research data (Table 15). Although there has

607 been proliferation in software to support data analysis, respondents indicate limited

608 experience of software beyond those readily available through Microsoft (e.g. Excel / Access)

609 (Table 15). The more specialist forms of analytical software that may be better designed, or

610 knowledge of may be desired by employers were rarely encountered. Further investigation is

611 necessary, but was beyond the scope of the current study, to explore why students have

612   limited experience of these other packages. However, based on the data obtained relating to

613   the research development of college-based HE lecturers, and literature relating to research

614   methods teaching in university-based HE (e.g. Coombs & Rybacki 1999; MacInnes, 2009),

615   this is likely to be owing to a combination of factors of which cost is likely to be the

616   contributing factor.

617

618   [Place Table 15 here]

619

620   **Conclusion**

621

622   This research provides initial insights into the teaching of research methods within the social

623   sciences, considering practice, attitudes and culture surrounding its delivery in college-based

624   HE in England. Parallels are emerging between college and university provision in relation to

625   the resourcing and support of RM teaching; however the focus of these issues is determined

626   by the structural and cultural foundations of different institutions. Within colleges the

627   resourcing implications are those relating to fundamental requirements such as software and

628   training, as well as a commitment to higher academic qualifications as a basis for staff

629   engagement with research. There are related issues on the place of research as an expected

630   activity of staff and whether it is considered to be of value in developing the capacity of staff

631   in research methods teaching.

632

633   Small group teaching and a range of integrated pedagogies have often been cited as a distinct

634   feature of college-based HE and this aspect of resourcing is evident within the data. Larger

635   colleges show a greater tendency toward stand-alone delivery, as opposed to integration of

636   research methods across provision. An integrated approach would seem to be more common

637   where a smaller body of HE provision exists. One assumption is that we are observing

638   economies of scale, where smaller providers can rationalise programme-specific (and more

639   integrated) forms of research methods teaching, with small cohorts not supporting the

640   amalgamation of research methods teaching. This is an area which would benefit from further

641   investigation.

642

643   Another issue emerging from this research relates to the constrained curriculum space for

644   research methods teaching. This is an area we were only able to make provisional inferences

645   regarding, and warrants further consideration particularly with respect to reviewing and

646 mapping research methods curricula. Such work could substantiate the emerging findings

647 regarding the attention given to different aspects of research methods teaching (e.g. literature

648 searching, theoretical foundations and reporting research), and where this fits with the range

649 of subjects and skills FDs are required to include. As a two year degree with a vocational

650 benchmark requirement we became aware of the pressures faced in curriculum development.

651 This is presented alongside the requirements necessitated for the large numbers of students

652 who use the FD as an articulation route to a level six honours degree. These multiple

653 requirements in terms of skills and knowledge means that research methods are pragmatically

654 translated as a vocationally based project within many programmes. The implications of this

655 are demonstrated in some of the empirical findings on lower levels of theoretical and

656 conceptual engagement with research. This may have implications for students progressing to

657 level six programmes where there is less emphasis on vocational practices as the foundation

658 of knowledge than within the FD.

659

660 One of the assumptions that can be increasingly challenged is the role of college HE as

661 exclusively catering for a brand of vocational HE. These assumptions can also viewed

662 alongside the demographic profile of college HE students, which remains grounded in

663 notions of widening participation. The accessibility of college HE provision means that it is

664 not only a location for vocationally orientated qualifications, but an institution that offers a

665 route into HE, or simply a more local and flexible version of HE. Discussions of academic

666 drift (Neave 1979; Garrod and Macfarlane 2009) or the purpose of the college (Wheelahan

667 2009) aside, if college-based HE is to grow and fulfil multiple functions then aspects of

668 curriculum such as research methods remain central concerns for practice notwithstanding the

669 emphasis on vocational and work-based learning that has been associated with this

670 development.

671

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