

Emerging HE cultures: perspectives from CETL Award Holders in a partner college network

Expansion of Higher Education (HE) into the Further Education (FE) sector has resulted in a renewed period of growth as colleges strive to create a culture and environment appropriate for HE. This paper presents findings from interviews with lecturers delivering HE in FE within the University of Plymouth Partner College network and explores the perceived impact of HE expansion. Lecturers felt that expansion had a positive impact on their students, as raising the profile of HE within their colleges has encouraged internal progression. However, practitioners' own experiences have been mixed. They felt there was limited recognition or understanding of the needs of HE from many of their FE colleagues, suggesting the presence of structural, education and managerial processes that may need to be considered in light of the emerging culture of HE. In our study the emerging HE culture within colleges appears to reflect a combination of the FE profile of the college, the non-traditional nature of the student body, the HE processes instigated through collaboration with the University and the emerging HE identity of lecturers. (178 words)

Keywords: Higher Education, Further Education, research & scholarly activity, Foundation Degree

Introduction

The University of Plymouth has supported the provision of HE in FE colleges since 1978. University of Plymouth Colleges (UPC) is one of the largest partnerships in the country, comprised of 21 institutions, 15 of which are FE colleges. In 2007-08 7,000 students (FTE) were registered on 296 courses delivered by 1800 staff.

In 2005 the Higher Education Learning Partnerships (HELP) Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) was funded by HEFCE to work with

UPC to enhance the experience of HE in FE students. The CETL (www.help-cetl.ac.uk) has provided infrastructure and resources for colleges to support students, opportunities for staff development and through research and development projects addresses key HE in FE issues (e.g. work-based learning) relating to Foundation Degrees (FD). In line with HEFCE objectives, a key aim of the HELP CETL is the promotion of an HE culture (HEFCE 2003a). For college staff this is supported through engagement with scholarly activity and research. Building on the experiences of national and international schemes providing opportunities for HE lecturers to promote the scholarship of teaching and learning (e.g. Ramsden and Martin 1996), the Award Holder Scheme (AHS) was introduced to provide such opportunities and to reward college staff for their contributions to learning and teaching.

Expansion of HE in FE

The Dearing Report placed the FE sector at the forefront of changes aimed at engaging half of 18 to 30 year-olds in HE by 2010 (NCIHE 1997). FDs were introduced as a means of supporting this expansion. They were designed to be a qualification with a technical, vocational or professional focus, to serve as a terminal qualification in their own right and offer an articulated progression route to the final year of an honours degree (HEFCE 2000). Provision was focused on colleges to enhance accessibility for local communities; thereby taking forward government agendas regarding widening participation and lifelong learning (DfES 2003).

HE within universities and colleges

Universities have long been recognised as centres of learning and knowledge creation. The focus of universities has gradually been modified since 1960s-70s, as they have responded to wider economic needs, knowledge being increasingly viewed as a commodity upon which society depends for future development (Barnett 1990). Despite these changes, research still has an integral role to play in the culture of universities, identities of academic staff and students' learning experience (Jenkins et al. 2007). Autonomous organisations with their own degree-awarding powers, the majority of UK universities have an international profile and draw their student body from a large national-international market (HEFCE 2003a). Compared to FE colleges university student cohorts tend to be larger, but the teaching loads of lecturing staff are lower and individual contact between staff and students limited (HEFCE 2003a).

The FE sector is very different. Colleges are widely recognised as centres of vocational and academic training which provide education across all levels for local communities (Edward et al. 2007). They provide a diverse range of qualifications validated by external awarding bodies, are required to meet the quality assurance protocols of external inspectors and are answerable to non-elected governing bodies (Edward et al. 2007). The overall culture of FE colleges is often cited as target driven with an emphasis placed on accountability and efficiency (Whitehead 2005). This tends to leave less scope for HE in FE practitioners to engage with self directed

research¹ and scholarly activity² (Harwood and Harwood 2004). The situation is exacerbated by the common perception that scholarly activity and research is not necessary within FE (Huddleston and Unwin 2002). This is supported by Harwood and Harwood (2004) who found that the professional identities of college lecturers were often rooted in their roles as teachers rather than researchers. Where opportunities have been provided for lecturers to engage with scholarly activity and research through staff development initiatives these have proved beneficial to institutions and staff (Cunningham and Doncaster 2002; Minty et al. 2007). Lecturers who participated in such initiatives experienced a sense of empowerment as they developed their professional knowledge and practice, which enabled them to make innovations to teaching practice and contribute to college-based developments (Cunningham and Doncaster 2002).

Nationally, opportunities for college lecturers to engage with research and scholarly activity are becoming increasingly important (HEFCE 2006). Although further work is required there is evidence of the positive benefits to students of research - teaching linkages (Jenkins et al. 2007). University students in research focused institutions value learning in a research environment and as a consequence perceive their lecturers as having current subject knowledge (Jenkins et al. 2007). There has been considerable debate as to where college lecturers should focus their energies; scholarly activity and/or research (HEFCE, 2003a). Whilst this debate is

¹ Research is defined in terms of the Research Assessment Exercise whereby original investigation is undertaken to gain knowledge and understanding (RAE 2005).

² Scholarly activity is defined through Boyer (1990) whereby scholarship encompasses knowledge discovery, application, integration and teaching.

ongoing, policymakers appear to have adopted a holistic definition of scholarly activity to ensure the range of professional development activities undertaken by college lecturers gain recognition and ensure a high quality student experience (HEFCE 2006). Likewise, following the recent introduction of the Integrated Quality Enhancement Review by the Quality Assurance Agency, attention will be increasingly paid to the opportunities for scholarly activity and research afforded to HE in FE staff (QAA 2008).

Research and scholarly activity in the HELP CETL

The AHS offers four types of financial award, allocated at the end of a competitive selection procedure, to support a piece of research or continuing professional development (CPD) for one year. Now in its fourth year, it has supported a range of activities to promote the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Our study

This paper presents Award Holders' experiences of teaching HE in FE and their perceptions of the emerging HE culture in their colleges. Due to the opportunities for scholarly activity and research offered by the CETL, it was possible to investigate their experiences of engaging with scholarly activity and research within an HE in FE setting.

UPC validates HE courses across all subject disciplines including the arts, science, technology, social sciences and business. The size and age of HE

provision varies across the UPC network. The AHS is open to all lecturing and support staff in UPC, and as a group Award Holders are diverse in terms of their disciplines, length of service, position within college, and experience. In some colleges HE and FE are integrated, meaning lecturers work across levels whereas at others they are separate and Award Holders lectured solely on HE courses. However, all participants had experience of teaching FE.

It was felt that the Award Holders could provide an overview of their experiences of delivering HE in FE, as not only have they engaged with scholarly activity and research, but they have had time to reflect on what this experience meant in relation to their colleges' HE provision. Whilst we acknowledge the Award Holders have had a unique opportunity, we feel their experiences offer a valuable insight into the emerging HE culture within their colleges and the potential contribution such opportunities can make.

Initially a questionnaire with 12 open questions exploring individuals' experience of teaching HE and undertaking scholarly activity and research was distributed to 30 Award Holders from the first two years of the Scheme. In total 63% of questionnaires were returned. These were manually coded using the constant comparative approach; text being examined to identify comparisons and cross cutting themes (Glaser & Strauss 1967), which were then used to inform interview questions. All Award Holders who completed the questionnaire agreed to be interviewed, and a sub-sample selected for interview from three partner colleges with a longstanding commitment to HE. Nine Award Holders were selected for interview,

and asked identical questions, in a 40 to 60 minute interview which was digitally recorded. Interviews were transcribed and thematically coded using the above approach.

Perceptions of the impact of HE expansion in colleges

Overall, the impact of increasing HE in FE provision for students was viewed positively. Increased accessibility, and the subsequent visibility of HE within their colleges, was viewed as creating more opportunities for learners, (particularly within their local area), and raising learner's aspirations:

“The majority of students we take do not feel that they are of university calibre (...) so we are raising the game for people who would not have normally associated themselves with HE.” (Respondent 1)

Beyond this, Award Holders' perceptions of the commitment their college had made to the development of HE were mixed. Whilst four of the Award Holders felt their college had made a clear commitment to developing an HE environment through specific investment in infrastructure, resources and facilities, others questioned their college's commitment as they felt the needs of HE had not necessarily been fully acknowledged:

“I am not convinced that the college as a whole values (HE), although it says it does, there are mixed messages about how far the college is committed to developing an HE centre.” (Respondent 2)

This manifested itself in a variety of ways; e.g. the requirement for HE lecturers to take attendance registers, which they felt countered the sense of independence in

learning they were trying to create, and the expectation for lecturers to undertake FE staff development, limiting time for HE related activities. This apparent mismatch of governance and management systems was taken as indicating a lack of wider understanding from FE colleagues of the needs of HE and suggesting a prevailing FE culture (Whitehead, 2005). Whilst this may not be unexpected given the environment the Award Holders are working in, it means that colleges may not easily be able to adapt to the more flexible approach these lecturers wish for their HE learners.

Perceptions of university HE culture

The Award Holders' perceptions of the university HE culture focused on the role of lecturers and students. Five of the Award Holders talked of HE students as independent learners who may not have the same learning/support needs commonly associated with FE learners identified by Hodkinson et al. (2007). They cited this independence as being facilitated by a mature learning environment. However, three Award Holders were concerned this learning environment could be undermined by the lack of distinct space for HE and FE learners. Three described the HE experience for university students being "*holistic*" (Respondent 9) in that, whilst supporting intellectual development it also encouraged social, moral and personal development. Whilst many of these points may be applicable to FE learners, here it seems the Award Holders had distinct perceptions of HE learner profiles.

In line with traditional perceptions of the role of university lecturers (see by Nixon 1990), Award Holders viewed research as central to university lecturers' academic practice and that it informed teaching. Equally they cited the importance of current subject knowledge. Reference was also made to the significant role played by academic structures and the presence of academic communities within which knowledge may be discussed and shared. Also freedom and autonomy were highlighted as valuable aspects of an HE culture. The term "freedom" was applied in reference to opportunities to explore areas of interest and freedom from the constraints of a high teaching load:

"...challenging attitudes, approaches and ideas without getting into trouble for it, daring to go down a different path." (Respondent 3)

These perceptions were largely rooted in the Award Holders' own experiences of HE, which for many was prior to the changes in HE associated with the Education Reform Act of 1988 and the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. The Award Holders' perceptions therefore demonstrate an awareness of the culture and environment *traditionally* attributed to universities, and this is likely to influence attempts to create an HE environment for their students.

The emerging HE culture in colleges

The Award Holders' discussion of the emerging HE culture highlighted perceived barriers relating to students and FE lecturers. However, mismatches in FE and HE governance, management and support structures were again felt to exert a significant impact on this emerging culture. These feelings were particularly acute

for individuals working across both levels who were expected to balance the competing demands of HE and FE teaching. The sentiments of these lecturers are not unique to UPC; other HE in FE practitioners reporting similar challenges (Young 2002). Four of the Award Holders also felt that within their colleges the nature of FD students was as a barrier, as they tend to be non-traditional learners who have more vocational experience and often differ widely in terms of age, commitments and education (HEFCE 2006). Many tend to be economically active, have family and/or work commitments and therefore not necessarily looking for a so-called “*holistic*” HE student experience:

“...I think a lot of it has also got to do with the kind of students that are attracted to do FDs. They often come from a different culture often from vocational courses and they've got very different attitudes towards study.”

(Respondent 8)

The Award Holders cited a lack of understanding from some FE colleagues about the need for, or relevance of, HE. This may be expected given the more vocational background of many FE lecturers and the perception that the primary function of a college is to provide further rather than higher education and reflects the often conflicting agendas and identities of HE and FE (Robson, 1998):

“I think for some people and in some areas it caused tension and also a lack of understanding and resentment. We are an FE college, why are we doing this?” (Respondent 3)

The imposition of FE governance and management may have served to hinder or suppress the sense of HE some lecturers were trying to create. For example, four

made reference to access to facilities e.g. opening hours of libraries that were often restricted to teaching hours and not fitted to their perceptions of HE learners' needs.

It is around discussions of scholarly activity and research that barriers associated with the prevailing FE management and governance structures became apparent. These related primarily to a lack of understanding of, or dispensation made, for lecturing HE. Seven of the Award Holders noted the lack of time and/or resources given to undertake scholarly activity and research or prepare for HE teaching, challenges also faced by lecturers working in other HE in FE partnerships (Young, 2002):

"I think managers don't always acknowledge the amount of time for preparation and the level of HE that is required from the staff delivering HE and try to impose an FE model." (Respondent 4)

This lack of understanding also meant that they felt the true nature of an HE lecturer's role was not fully appreciated. This is reflected in the way Award Holders commented on the perception that their primary function was to teach, and that subsequently they were not given sufficient time to undertake scholarly activity and research.

"...but if you're doing scholarly activity there is no learner in front of you so it is not in the system to be recognised as a justifiable way of spending your time." (Respondent 1)

This comment was echoed by another Award Holder who noted that whilst research activity does take place within their college, most of it tends to be associated with

higher degrees. This was based on this individual's own experience of attempting to conduct research which got *"lost in the everydayness."* (Respondent 5)

In colleges where support was available for scholarly activity and research, there was a lack of clarity concerning funding and support, again highlighting the fact that scholarly activity and research is not always priority on college agendas.

According to one Award Holder:

"...generally a receptive atmosphere...at the minute, (but) there is always the sense that it might change cos [sic] it is not within the (college) structure..."
(Respondent 2)

This lack of understanding was recorded elsewhere in an additional study with Award Holders exploring the impact of their Awards (Turner et al 2008). These individuals also felt that their achievement received limited recognition within their own institution and that it was only of interest to the college when required to provide evidence of scholarly activity and research within their institution (Turner et al 2008).

"The only time it is really addressed is when external agencies such as UPC require it to be evidenced..." (Respondent 3)

The Award Holders all acknowledged the current need for organisations such as the HELP CETL to provide opportunities for scholarly activity and research. Whilst financial support was cited as essential, reference was made to the immeasurable impact of Awards in relation to increased personal and professional confidence. Also mentioned were the wider, more esoteric, impacts on their emerging professional identities as HE practitioners in FE colleges.

“...and I was saying when I did my CETL (project) I felt like a proper HE lecturer because I had a research project (and) that was the difference for me...I think for myself being a proper HE lecturer.” (Respondent 5)

Conclusions

The Award Holders have had more opportunities than most to engage with scholarly activity and research and therefore their experiences of delivering HE in an FE context may not be representative of the wider picture. However, as HE in FE continues to remain at the forefront of government policy, lessons can be learnt from the Award Holders' experiences regarding the emerging HE culture within colleges and the positive contribution engagement with scholarly activity and research can make to individuals' perceptions of themselves as HE lecturers.

Whilst the benefits of expansion of HE in FE for students were acknowledged, it was felt that currently there was limited recognition or understanding of the needs of HE in FE amongst colleagues and managers. Within colleges it seemed that HE was often operating under the structural and managerial constraints of FE, something partly mitigated by the support provided by UPC and the HELP CETL. Therefore, although individuals do have a clear appreciation of the role they should be performing and culture they should be contributing to, they often felt that there was currently a lack of support for them to achieve these, leading to feelings of frustration and tensions between HE and FE.

For the Award Holders scholarly activity and research appears to play a key role in the HE culture emerging in their colleges. Receiving an Award promoted confidence and accessibility to research and scholarly activity. It contributed to their professional identities as HE practitioners, making them feel like “*proper HE lecturers*” (Respondent 5). However, it also appeared to highlight the distinction between HE and FE. The positive effects of engagement with scholarly activity and research mirror the impacts of other such initiatives. Cunningham and Doncaster (2002) noted that four years after a programme had been introduced to provide teaching and learning based research opportunities for FE practitioners, a research culture had become embedded within the institution.

HE in FE is operating in a very different arena to HE delivered in universities. Based on these varying positions, and the comments made by Award Holders, it would appear that the emerging HE in FE culture in their colleges is a hybrid which is neither HE (as they perceive as prevailing within universities) nor FE (as perceived by FE colleagues). This may reflect the non-traditional nature of the student body, the dispersed geographic spread of colleges in the UPC network and the context lecturers work within.

Potentially exacerbating the situation for HE in FE further are the multiple policies and agendas being imposed across the FE sector. Rather than responding to the demands of one agenda or one agency, colleges need to meet the requirements of many simultaneously. It is probable that the tensions between HE and FE will only be resolved as HE provision within colleges matures, develops a

clear identity within institutions and subsequently receives the recognition and support lecturers feel it deserves. This is likely to be dependent on a critical mass of HE practitioners being achieved with appropriate structures and support for their work. Here organisations such as UPC and the HELP CETL could play crucial role as they serve to support practitioners and managers to make the changes necessary to support growing HE provision.

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