Reasons for Choosing a Further Education: the views of 700 new entrants

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ABSTRACT This article explores some reasons for choosing a further education given by 700 new entrants to 10 Scottish further education colleges. It tries to distinguish between instrumental reasons, such as those concerned with the quest for employment and what students perceive as most intrinsically worthwhile about a further education. It also tries to identify some of the methods of communication that are most effective in attracting students to further education. It seems that leaflets and mail shots are by far the most effective methods of communication before students enter college. The local reputation of the college as a place where good social relationships are fostered including those fostered in the classroom seems more important than the resources devoted to teaching. Even though many new entrants cite instrumental reasons as being very important, detail in the curriculum seems to be much less important to them. We speculate that this is because students are prepared to trust such detail to teachers they perceive to be good. Colleges therefore have an opportunity, if not a responsibility, to take students beyond instrumentalism.

Introduction

More students are choosing to study in Scottish further education (FE) colleges. In 1996-97 there were 354,363 students registered on vocational courses at 43 colleges (Scottish Office Education and Industry Department, 1998). This figure represented a growth from the previous year of 9% in full time students and 31% in part time students. There has also been an increase in the range of courses offered by colleges. In particular, there has been significant expansion of higher education provision in FE colleges. Courses leading to Higher National Certificates and Diplomas (HNC/HND) have grown, in part as a result of the marketing

of the idea that a further education is an intermediate step on the road to a higher education. Access courses, articulation between FE and HE and degree franchising arrangements support this idea. Paterson (1999) argues that, while the aim of widening access to higher education is to be welcomed, there is a danger that the identity of FE may be lost in marketing strategies that depend upon FE being seen purely in instrumental terms. A similar argument may be used against the idea that FE should market itself primarily as a step on the road to a job. If FE were to market itself exclusively in such instrumental terms then there would be no obvious reasons why students should enrol in FE, rather than teach themselves, study alongside school pupils or learn 'on the job'.

There is some general research data on adult returners to FE and their reasons for participation. For example, Blair et al (1993) list 13 separate goals provided by 50 respondents. 'To get a better job' and 'to gain qualifications' were the commonest reasons, but 'avoidance' (e.g. avoiding an unhappy marriage) came third in the ranking. These researchers found that, 'further education was the least attractive setting in which to pursue personal goals, but the most attractive for those related to employment' (Blair et al, 1993, p. 25), though as this last finding is based on data from only 14 respondents, it would be wise to be cautious in drawing conclusions. McGivney (1992) conducted research with 50 institutions in England and Wales with similar results. In other words, it appears that instrumental reasons feature prominently in the explanations given for participation in FE. Our study confirms this. However, Munn & MacDonald (1988) point out that adults can have multiple reasons for returning to education and Munn et al (1993) distinguish between three groups of potential new entrants: adults who know where they are going and how to get there, adults who are uncertain about their goals or how to achieve them (the largest group) and reluctant participants. Let us neglect for a moment the first and third of these groups, and concentrate on the majority who are uncertain both about the means and ends of formal learning. What is it that might attract them to a further education apart from a desire to earn a living in a useful way like many other people and a belief that FE can help them to do that?

The Identity of FE

The main question that is addressed in our study concerns the features of a further education that define its non-instrumental identity for those who have chosen to participate in it. One possibility is that the content of what is learnt in FE is important. Many colleges used to be called technical colleges or colleges of technology as a reflection of their origins as institutions for learning about technology, rather than the liberal arts, for example (Halliday, 1999). Another possibility is the teaching of types of knowledge, which universities deem to be inferior. For example,

dissemination of good practice in catering or aromatherapy as opposed to creation, analysis and criticism of abstract ideas may be important (McNair, 1997). In these ways, FE may be seen to be dismissive of learning apparently unconnected to the world of work, but identified with learning that is a preparation for that world. Avis (1997a) suggests that the complexity in student motivations is such that a simple vocational-liberal dimension is inadequate for analysing the identity of FE however. Whatever orientations students have and experiences they seek, 'the key issue is the way in which these orientations and experiences close off or open up possibilities for students' (Avis, 1997a, p. 44).

Our interview data suggests that the majority of students cannot clearly see how such possibilities might be opened up for them. It is very unlikely that researchers can understand the reasons individual students had for entering FE simply by asking them in a standard questionnaire, albeit followed up by in-depth interviews. Quite apart from sampling considerations, which are discussed below, it is wise to be very tentative in drawing conclusions from research, which is based on these methods. Nevertheless, the research described here does indicate the kind of considerations that might be worth exploring further by policy-makers, managers and others concerned with the identity of a further education, and the implications this has for its marketing.

Methods

The authors taught a research module to FE lecturers and the study described in this article was designed to build on the lecturers' expertise to say something of significance about the FE sector as a whole. The 11 lecturers who participated in the module were all relatively experienced. They agreed that the topic of this article was worth investigating and shared ideas about how to interpret the literature and develop research questions in the light of their experience. In the remainder of this article these lecturers will be referred to as 'collaborators' to distinguish them from their own FE-based students.

The 11 collaborators taught in 10 different colleges, seven in the wider Glasgow conurbation and three in other parts of lowland Scotland. The subjects of the study were thus FE students taught by the collaborators and their colleagues. A questionnaire was developed by the group and piloted by one collaborator who was teaching an evening class concurrently with his own studies. Minor amendments were made as a result of the pilot. It was agreed that each collaborator would administer the questionnaire with at least 40 students and would conduct unstructured interviews with two respondents. As it turned out, most collaborators administered far more than these numbers.

The students were all many months into their courses when they were approached to participate in the study. Following the data

collection stage the authors held a workshop at which collaborators presented summaries of their findings for discussion. This discussion prompted them to pursue further certain lines of enquiry with their students in interviews. The data on which this paper is based includes 700 completed questionnaires, coded and analysed using SPSS v. 6.1, as well as qualitative reports prepared from the interview data.

Results

Characteristics of the Sample

Of 759 questionnaires received, 58 (8%) were excluded from analysis because they did not provide sufficient information for coding. The results distinguish between students studying in eight Scottish FE colleges recruiting mainly from the surrounding urban community ('community colleges'), those studying in a specialist, mainly land-based college ('monotechnic college') and those studying in a college offering mainly higher education provision at HNC/HND level ('HE college').

Sampling was largely determined by the number of willing participants and this inevitably skewed the results. Also, the sample comprised students who deliberately chose to participate in FE and excludes any consideration of why so many people choose never to go near an FE college – a vital point to remember when attempting to draw normative conclusions from the data. Table I shows the distribution of respondents across the three sub-types of FE provision. The table also shows the proportion of respondents in each type of college studying at higher education (HE) level; as the mean for all Scottish FE colleges is 19%, it seems that our sample was skewed towards HE level students. Nevertheless, this is an important growth area for all colleges, with activity increasing by 11% across Scotland between 1995-96 and 1996-97.

Type of college	*n* (%)	% Studying at HE level
Community college	510 (73)	35
Monotechnic college	98 (14)	25
HE college	93 (13)	100
Total	701 (100)	—

Table I. Sample by college type and proportion of higher level students.

The collaborators were not asked to ensure that their samples were representative of the overall college population; for this reason, it is

important to describe the particular characteristics of this sample and make comparisons with average figures for Scottish FE. Of the 701 students in the sample, 407 (58%) were studying at 'non-advanced' level, typically on modular programmes leading to National Certificate awards in vocational areas, such as forestry and caring. The remainder, 294 (42%), were studying at 'advanced' level on courses leading to HNC or HND awards, which can lead to employment at technician grade or progression to degree studies. There were also significant differences in the characteristics of the students in the different types of college. For example, whilst the HE college sample had a fairly even gender split (54% male/46% female) the community college sample was 76% female, while the monotechnic college was 69% male. The HE college figure corresponds closely to the mean for HE courses in Scottish colleges, though the community college sample contains a much higher proportion of females than the Scottish average (54% for all students and 58% for students aged over 25). Also, while the monotechnic college students tended to be younger (83% aged 16-24), the community colleges' students were significantly older (50% aged over 25, compared with 33% in the HE college). The HE college figure is considerably higher than the mean for Scotland at this age (10%), while the community college figure is close to the mean (44%).

Table II shows the high proportion of the community college sample balancing studies with responsibilities for dependants, highlighting the importance of flexibility in timetabling of classes and suitable child care arrangements.

Dependant	Type of college			
	Monotechnic *n* (%)	Community *n* (%)	HE *n* (%)	Total *n* (%)
Child	3 (50.0)	167 (87.0)	9 (60.0)	179 (84.0)
Elderly relative	2 (33.3)	9 (4.7)	3 (20.0)	14 (6.6)
Others	1 (16.7)	16 (8.3)	3 (20.0)	20 (9.4)
Total	6 (100)	192 (100)	15 (100)	213 (100)

Table II. Caring responsibilities of students.

Our results indicate that the majority of female returners are very influenced by such considerations. This is recognised, of course, by the number of colleges that provide childcare facilities for students. The work of our collaborators suggests that this is rather a complex issue. 'Child care rules your life' is how one student described her situation. In effect, this means that adults with children seeking to enter FE choose the

college before the course, a significant limitation on choice. Crèche facilities are only of use to parents of pre-school children. Students also spoke about the importance of being able to fit class attendance around times which allowed children to be taken to and collected from school. However, children are important influences on their parents' educational aspirations in other ways. One student said she enrolled in college to escape 'baby talk'. Studying to help improve the economic prospects of the family and involvement resulting from an interest in children's school achievements are other important motivations centred on the family experience.

Table III shows what students were doing immediately prior to entering college. The community college students were significantly more likely to have been unemployed or in unpaid employment before beginning their studies than those in the monotechnic and HE colleges. This information highlights the importance of FE for students from low-income backgrounds.

Status before enrolling in college	Type of college			
	Monotechnic *n* (%)	Community *n* (%)	HE *n* (%)	Total *n* (%)
At school	28 (28.6)	155 (30.8)	39 (41.8)	222 (32.0)
At another college or university	7 (7.1)	29 (5.8)	10 (10.8)	46 (6.6)
Paid employment	44 (44.9)	157 (31.2)	37 (39.8)	238 (34.3)
Unpaid employment or unemployment	18 (18.4)	156 (31.0)	6 (6.5)	180 (25.9)
More than one choice	1 (1.0)	6 (1.2)	1 (1.1)	8 (1.2)
Total	98 (100)	503 (100)	93 (100)	694 (100)

^{2} = 32.67; $P < 0.001$

Table III. What students were doing before enrolling in college.

Choice of Place to Study

The questionnaire invited students to indicate factors that were important to them when making their choice of place to study. The factors had been previously generated through discussion with collaborators and refined in the pilot test. Factors were grouped as

shown in Table IV. For each group respondents were asked to identify the factor 'most important' to them.

Factor grouping	Factors
Features of the college	Location; facilities; resources; reputation; atmosphere
Curriculum/programme of study	Course I wanted; interested in subject; work experience offered; possibility of overseas study; flexible arrangements
Social reasons	To meet other people; to get out of the house; recreation/leisure; to help with my confidence
Employment reasons	Upgrading skills; gaining qualifications; to make a career change; improving job prospects
Encouragement/support from	Friends; family; employer; social worker; careers/advice service; Benefits Agency/Employment Service
Pressure from	Friends; family; employer; social worker; careers/advice service; Benefits Agency/Employment Service
College marketing activities	Open day; advertising; prospectus/leaflets; mail shot; links with school
Possibility of progress to more advanced courses	In the college; at a university

Table IV. Possible factors influencing choice of place of study presented to respondents.

The single most important factor influencing all students' decisions about studying at their chosen college was an 'employment reason'. However, the results also revealed significant differences in the extent to which this applies overall to students from the three different types of college (57% of the monotechnic college students, 63% of the community college students and 73% of the HE college students ($^2 = 4.53$; $P < 0.001$). In other words, community college students appear to be more varied in their reasons for seeking a further education. This point is further supported by the results obtained in the factor grouping, 'social reasons', where 'to meet other people' was also regarded as important by students in all colleges, but significantly less so amongst students in the HE college (monotechnic = 79%, FE = 81%, HE = 67%; $^2 = 8.86$; $P = 0.01$). Whilst

students overall are divided about whether they chose college as an alternative to boredom (44% agreed with the statement that they enrolled in college 'to get out of the house'), a significantly smaller proportion of the HE college students endorsed this social reason (27%, compared with 47% of the community college and 43% of the monotechnic samples; ^{2} = 10.53; P = 0.005).

A majority of students (69%) agreed that improving personal confidence was an important motivational factor in their enrolment. This factor is significantly more important for community college students (71%) and monotechnic college students (66%) than for HE college students (57%; ^{2} = 6.79; P = 0.034). The centrality of the confidence factor was highlighted in an interview conducted by one of our collaborators. A 43-year-old mother of two young children, returned to work part-time in a clerical post. However, she discovered that office technology had moved on during her time away from work and was passed over for promotion. She enrolled on a full time course in Business Studies to learn about modern office practice, but also learned to recognise considerable personal strengths. As a result, she had revised her plans for employment since, as she explained, 'I am capable of more than I had ever thought'. Another student spoke about the effect of bullying experiences whilst at school, which had affected her ability to learn; starting college had allowed her to experience success in learning for the first time, altering her self-concept and raising ambitions. These differences are illustrated in Table V.

Factors	Type of college			
	Monotechnic *n* (%)	Community *n* (%)	HE *n* (%)	Total *n* (%)
Work experience	32 (45.1)	124 (39.4)	16 (23.9)	172 (38.0)
Overseas study	18 (25.7)	39 (12.7)	9 (13.6)	66 (14.9)
Flexible study arrangements	27 (40.3)	203 (58.3)	29 (41.4)	259 (53.4)
Social: to meet people	66 (78.6)	367 (81.4)	57 (67.1)	490 (79.0)
Social: to get out of the house	34 (42.5)	189 (47.3)	21 (27.3)	244 (43.8)
To help confidence	55 (65.5)	307 (71.4)	47 (57.3)	409 (68.6)

Table V. Factors influencing choice of place to study.

The students were asked to indicate which of five features of a college were most important to them. Location was identified as the most

important feature by 49% of students. Resources and reputation were most important for 22 and 18% of students, respectively. Facilities (5%) and atmosphere (6%) in comparison appear to be relatively unimportant in making enrolment decisions. Once again, there are interesting differences in the relative importance of these factors in the decision making of students in the different types of college. These differences are illustrated in Table VI.

Location is significantly more important to community college students, while resources and reputation are more influential in the enrolment decisions of monotechnic and HE college students. This is consistent with the needs of community college students who tend to be older, with dependants. The opportunity to progress within further and higher education was a significant influence on the enrolment decisions of almost 80% of all students, while attendance at a college open day was influential for 56% of community college and 61% of HE college students, but only 41% of monotechnic students.

Features of the college	Type of college			
	Monotechnic *n* (%)	Community *n* (%)	HE *n* (%)	Total *n* (%)
Location	25 (27.5)	242 (55.9)	32 (36.8)	299 (48.9)
Facilities	6 (6.6)	22 (5.1)	3 (3.5)	31 (5.1)
Resources	28 (30.7)	86 (19.8)	21 (24.1)	135 (22.1)
Reputation	23 (25.3)	61 (14.1)	25 (28.7)	109 (17.8)
Atmosphere	9 (9.9)	22 (5.1)	6 (6.9)	37 (6.1)
Total	91 (100)	433 (100)	87 (100)	611 (100)

^{2} = 35.60; $P < 0.001$

Table VI. Features of the college 'most important' in enrolment decision.

Discussion

The age profile, employment history and life history of students at the three colleges follows expected patterns in that community college students are older, tend to be female, have more caring responsibilities, and experience of unpaid employment or unemployment. Those attending the HE type college tend to be younger and more focussed on particular career options. The monotechnic type college student

population tends to have more experience of employment, fewer caring responsibilities, are more likely to be male and uninterested in what might be regarded as student services such as financial guidance. Despite these differences some common reasons can be discerned across the three types of colleges:

> Printed material in the form of leaflets and prospectuses were by far the most important means of communication between college and potential student.
> Resources to support learning are nothing like so important to students as might be imagined. Despite the differences between the different types of college, it turns out that resources supporting student attendance in the first place are far more important to students than resources that support their learning once they are there. So, for example, crèche and childcare facilities, and the availability of financial support are crucial, whereas only in the HE type institution did resources to support teaching become significant.
> Location is a very important factor, not only for convenience of access, but also because of the perception that a college has a local identity. It was hard to interpret this reason further. When questioned in the interviews, students referred vaguely to the feeling that the college was a place where they knew some of their friends worked or studied happily.
> While the broad area of study chosen by students was important, it seems that they were more than happy to leave the precise choice of lesson content up to lecturers. It seems that they are uninterested in the precise details of the competencies that they are supposed to be acquiring rather than the broad thrust of their learning. In this respect they reflect the point made earlier that the liberal/vocational distinction is far from clear-cut in the students' minds. As Avis (1997b, p. 103) argues, there is a need to move beyond 'a concern solely with articulation between work and education to one that involves social justice and citizenship.'
> For many students particularly those that attend the community type college, the social aspect of college life is very important. They make no distinction here between their social life in class and out of class, and seem to expect that learning will be a rewarding social, as well as educational experience.

Conclusions

While we are cautious in drawing too strong conclusions from this study for the reasons outlined earlier, we nevertheless think that the findings described above are reasonably robust. They carry clear implications for the programme of widening access to formal educational institutions, which is one of the present United Kingdom government's key strategies

for tackling social exclusion. However, it should remembered that those who never enter FE may have entirely different reasons for not doing so than the opposite of the ones given by new entrants in our study.

We believe that our findings may be connected in that we think that an entirely fresh way of conceiving the relationship between learning and life may be needed for FE. The idea that it is principally about a vocational instruction or a step on the way to a higher education may be outdated. It is clear that students want learning to connect to life as they live it locally and *vice versa*. The study points to a vision of lifelong leaning in which resources to support life are not seen as distinct from resources to support learning, and in which people, rather than technical equipment are the primary resource. We concede that there may be exceptions to this, such as access to new technology, but our study did not differentiate sufficiently between different types of resources that might be relevant to learners. The recent study by Martinez & Munday (1998) appears to support this view. In their study of 8500 students in 31 FE colleges in England they found that lower drop-out rates were more closely associated with better information systems, tailored curricula, teaching skills and student relationships than with improvements to accommodation and equipment.

For us, as teacher educators, the most important conclusion concerns the way that students seem to perceive good teaching in FE. It is not so much concerned with the detail of the competencies they acquire, but how the lecturer is able to relate learning to life in what the students regard as a socially acceptable way. We intend to investigate this further.

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