

HE in FE and scholarly activity – a discussion paper

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Introduction

The government target of 50% participation in higher education by 2010 sets challenges for universities, colleges and schools. A great deal of effort and resource has been devoted to raising aspirations amongst younger learners and there is a recognition that improvement in participation and achievement at Levels 2 and 3 will be an essential precursor to success. The drive for greater participation has also stimulated more FECs to offer programmes of higher education, whether directly funded by HEFCE or via franchise or other partnerships with universities as part of the attempt to provide some 350,000 FTE student places by 2010.

As those FECs begin to deliver an increased amount of higher education, a number of issues have been identified which could act as a real barrier to successful delivery. This paper considers one of those, which has a direct impact on the ability of FECs to deploy staff to teach higher education courses, that of “scholarly activity”. It also indicates where further work may usefully be done. Consideration of the role of scholarly activity is important in several ways. External quality assessments whether from QAA, validating universities or recognised professional bodies may seek appropriate evidence whether implicitly or explicitly that college staff are engaged in purposeful activity of this nature. The ability of colleges and HEIs to work in long term partnership to deliver the government’s challenging target and maintain the high standards expected by everyone concerned will be influenced to a large extent by how this issue is approached and resolved.

What is scholarly activity?

One of the problems facing FECs is that no comprehensive or authoritative definition seems to be available. However, drawing on practice principally from Mixed Economy Group colleges, it is felt that scholarly activity contains one or more of the following:

- Continuous reading or other work aimed at maintaining currency in the subject to an appropriate level
- Wider reading in the subject so as to equip the teacher to deal with potentially stretching student questions or research topics and to prepare for changes in subject matter following original research
- Contribution to the development of the chosen field e.g. by designing new curriculum models or approaches
- Involvement in higher level professional activity in the chosen field e.g. clinical practice, business consultancy

One of the difficulties which will be considered later in this paper is that of differentiating activity which might be undertaken by staff teaching HE programmes from that undertaken by staff teaching at other levels.

For the purposes of this paper, scholarly activity is distinguished from research, which is taken to mean research as recognised in the RAE, leading either to publication, product development or other contribution to original scholarship in the field. Such research, and in particular the obligation to participate in it, may be one of the key differentiating factors between the core role of a lecturer in an FEC and one in an HEI. Although there are opportunities for staff in FECs to undertake research these are limited by funding availability and by the fact that such research is generally outside the stated mission of FECs. Such research as does take place is usually in specialised or niche vocational areas and funded by industry for specific purposes. Other research activities can be found in staff undertaking research for higher degrees as part of their professional development. Whilst valuable, this research may best be regarded as an individual contribution and not a feature of the provision of HE in FE.

One area of research which should not be overlooked is the exploration of issues affecting the work of the FE sector itself, e.g. the many projects funded by LSDA and others using funding from Standards Fund or HE Teaching and Learning funds. This is probably an undervalued area and worthy of further consideration.

What happens in colleges?

The findings of the recent research exercise led by NIACE etc confirm that the teaching hours expected of a lecturer in an FEC are significantly more than those required of a teacher in an HEI. In some cases, this becomes a focus of contention between the college and its staff and the college and validating bodies.

Perhaps it is hardly surprising given the diversity of the sector that the picture which emerges from colleges is inconsistent. In some, often those either beginning to develop HE programmes or with a limited offer, staff teaching HE courses are given reduced teaching hours funded from main college budgets. However, there appears in these cases to be no clearly devised formula for determining the extent of such reduced contact and issues about comparability with other demands for remission. It remains to be seen whether such reductions in contact time continue once the development phase is concluded.

Other colleges, often those with a longer history of HE delivery, either rely on staff appointed more than ten years ago (i.e. before college incorporation) whose conditions of service may be more beneficial (a small proportion of staff) or do not formally recognise any differential between staff teaching HE and FE courses. This appears to feature particularly in colleges where the HE offer extends only to HND or other "sub degree" work including professional qualifications. In some colleges, teaching on such courses is seen as a reward or recognition and as such is keenly sought.

More focussed issues arise where colleges are involved in the delivery of final Honours or even postgraduate qualifications. Comparisons with colleagues working in HEIs are more direct, particularly if the mode of delivery is full time. In some cases where colleges operate on split sites with one site devoted to HE provision, the issues have sometimes been less

prominent. Ironically, the move to improve accommodation and facilities for all students by concentrating activity on a single campus has led to a renewed focus on this aspect of staff utilisation.

Comparability

The limited amount of analysis undertaken on scholarly activity in FECs reveals a varied pattern, which in turn raises issues of comparison with activity in an HEI. Some of the examples cited may not be readily recognised within an HEI as constituting acceptable activity e.g. producing or acting in plays, browsing through journals, work placement. Other work clearly does e.g. study for higher degrees.

None of what has been written above should be taken in any way to denigrate the activities carried out. It may be that given the subject spread of much HE in FE, the concept of new students for a new HE may also need to be applied to the staff teaching on courses. A new definition of scholarly activity, recognised by funding and validating bodies in the context of the FE College may be required. This may be a particular issue where universities are asked to validate provision, perhaps as Foundation Degrees, which lies outside the expertise of that particular institution. Responses may include recognition that the design and quality enhancement procedures now under development in HEIs represent an area of generic expertise which can be shared with and support the activities of colleges. Alternatively, universities may find it appropriate to share expertise in new subject areas not only with colleges but also other universities or professional bodies. Some of the more promising areas for Foundation degree development may inevitably fall into this category e.g. provision for the many students obtaining qualifications at Level 3 NVQ or equivalent in hairdressing, beauty therapy and related fields.

Within colleges, other issues of comparability arise. Funding levels for LSC provision are less advantageous and expectations different. However, colleges have real difficulty in an approach to staff deployment which appears to treat staff delivering HE courses preferentially. No mechanisms exist to compare the relative demand for time in developing and delivering other areas of the curriculum for example the new A2 courses, with provision for students with learning or behavioural difficulties, with those teaching on programmes of higher education. Many colleges take seriously the possibility of legal action based on the "equal value" which all of these activities may provide for the institution. Financial constraints rule out any attempt to eliminate the risk by allowing all staff to benefit from the terms and conditions which might apply in HEIs.

Some colleges have explored the possibility of different terms and conditions of service for staff teaching HE and FE courses. Leaving aside the probability that the legal considerations referred to above would also apply here, the problem is further compounded by the fact that in most FECs staff teach on both FE and HE programmes. Indeed, there are perceived benefits to the widening participation initiatives in having the some staff teaching students as they progress from FE to HE courses. However, it does mean that any solution to the problem must be capable of dealing with the range of duties inevitably demanded from staff working in an FEC.

What can be done?

In discussion, a number of potential ways forward were identified. None of these can at this stage be regarded as a total solution. As will be seen, some may depend on the robustness of the partnerships between colleges and universities, whilst others require a new definition of scholarly activity in the context of the Further Education College. What follows is a summary of those thoughts.

- Establish a clear differentiation between study at degree and sub-degree level. (As an aside, the author dislikes these terms and would welcome an alternative.) This would reflect the situation in a number of colleges where teaching on subdegree programmes (largely HND/HNC in vocational disciplines) is seen as preferred teaching. Validation may not be via an HEI but make use of Edexcel or professional bodies, thus reducing the impact of some of the issues arising from comparability with staff working in HEIs. Any reduction in staff teaching requirements would be dealt with via established procedures for staff development. However, the trend towards replacing these awards with Foundation Degrees may reduce the potential usefulness of this approach.
- Review funding and validation arrangements with partner universities. Preliminary work on the content of franchising and other arrangements between universities and colleges shows a wide diversity of practice. The recently announced HEFCE review of this area is to be welcomed as an opportunity to explore this and other issues in appropriate depth. Few if any of the agreements between universities and colleges received by the author as part of a survey for the Mixed Economy Group of colleges make specific reference to staff development activity. Some make reference to college staff having access to university courses and training but none specifically provide for a fund to support release of staff time for scholarly activity. Clearly, the acceptability of such funding will be determined by the approach taken by the parties. If the franchising university sees this as an opportunity to hold back more funding, the effect may be limited. In similar fashion, if recipient colleges apply the funds in such a way as dilute the effect in preparing staff to teach at Higher level, then success will be limited. This solution may have the merit of resolving the more intractable legal issues.
- Advanced practitioner status. Some colleges have raised the possibility of utilising funding available under the Teaching Pay Initiative to incentivise teachers engaged on delivering programmes of higher education. Inevitably due to the constraints of the scheme, any arrangements entered into may be peculiar to that institution and dependent on this source of funding. Some of the internal issues about relative value and esteem attached to particular activities may also apply.
- Some colleges have identified the relatively high taught hours enjoyed by students following HE courses in FECs, where contact hours for students may be anything up to twice as high as those on an equivalent course in an HEI. This is often explained by the lower entry threshold applied by most FECs. However, it may represent a potential area for exploration to create the headroom needed to reflect comparable staffing policies.

- Some colleges have made use of the HEFCE Teaching and Learning fund. However, many report that as the sums made available reflect current HE numbers and not forecast expansion, the impact of funding from this source will be limited. In addition, the fund is also intended to support capital development for HE in FE and curriculum development. Many colleges believe that demands from these sources will more than account for the funds available and not form a permanent solution to the problem of funding scholarly activity. However, the fund does represent a further resource.

Conclusion

It is clear that more work could valuably be done to explore the issues outlined above. Two things appear self-evident. Firstly, whatever solutions are found must be clear, open and transparent i.e. they will stand up to comparison with both the experience of teachers in HEIs and those working on other programmes in an FEC. Secondly, it must be recognised by both FECS and HEIs that a serious attempt to address and achieve the government target will require compromise and change on both sides, coupled with mutual understanding and trust. If both of these elements can be brought together then standards will be maintained and enhanced and more learners encouraged to benefit from higher education.