



HE in FE: Partner Perspectives

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3. HE in FE – What is the research telling us?

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Higher education (HE) delivered in further education (FE) settings is well established and as Scott (2009) notes, can be traced back to the 1950s when the HE sector was enlarged by incorporating elements of FE. Subsequent waves of expansion have led to the current position today where some 10% of HE is delivered in FE (AoC, 2011). However, HE in FE is still in the margins rather than the mainstream - it receives limited policy attention (Scott, 2009) and, as a number of commentators have noted, continues to be relatively under researched (Parry & Thompson, 2002, Jones 2006; and Tight, 2009). In setting out what the research is telling us about HE delivered in the FE sector we highlight the unevenness of coverage and consequent gaps in the literature; note how the scope and scale of research studies impacts on the ability to generalise and make comparisons between HE delivered in the FE sector and HE delivered in the HE sector.

HE in FE is far from homogenous and the scale of provision belies its complexity in terms of funding and diversity in terms of provision and participants. The scale and scope of provision varies between FE colleges in terms of: both the number of “prescribed” and “non-prescribed” programmes, the former funded through the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the latter through the Skills Funding Agency (SFA); the mix of academic and vocational programmes; the total number of learners and the proportion of HE learners to FE learners. As part of a recent report to HEFCE, Rashid *et al* (2011), drawing on administrative data for 2007/8, provide a statistical summary and useful commentary on the characteristics of HE in FE learners. The majority of students (79%) were studying at sub-degree level (Higher National Diploma, Higher National Certificate or Foundation Degree), 14% were pursuing degree level study, whilst 6% were studying at postgraduate level. In terms of mode of study 69% were studying part-time. The majority of students studying at degree level were studying full-time and were under 25 years of age, compared to the majority of part-time students who were aged over 25. In terms of ethnicity, 83% of students were white or white British compared to 63% of undergraduates for all HEIs. HE in FE students also had a broader range of entry qualifications compared to their peers in the HE sector.

Overall the coverage of research on HE delivered in the FE sector is uneven. Much of the literature focuses on policy, management, organization and structure whilst in comparison the student experience, academic identity, learner identity and the role and perspective of employers is under researched. Research studies on HE in FE are often small scale and limited in scope; and whilst such studies may provide useful findings and contribute to the evidence base it is often difficult to make comparisons or generalisations between HE delivered in the FE sector and HE delivered in the HE sector. However, when gathering and analysing administrative data to make such comparisons this is further compounded, as Rashid *et al* (2011:2) note: by the “*overlapping boundaries*” of the dual sector system and “*the uneven coverage of some statistical information.*”

Since 2007 all final year higher education students at colleges in England are eligible to participate in the National Student Survey (NSS), enabling comparison between HE delivered in the FE sector and HE delivered in the HE sector. Introduced in 2005 the NSS asks final year undergraduates to provide feedback on their courses and their learning experience as a whole. However, the NSS is not without its critics who have described it as: “*Shallow, costly, widely manipulated and methodologically worthless*” (Harvey, 2008). Critics argue that the NSS produces little more than to rank programmes and institutions and does not provide a definitive indicator of student perspectives or experiences.

Drawing on our own small scale research (Hudson & Berzins, 2011) which aimed to address some of the gaps in the research by looking specifically at the experience of HE students in the FE sector and learner identity, a number of themes emerged, including: the importance of place and community; small class sizes; accessible and engaged teachers; and specialised facilities and equipment.

Exploring why learners chose to undertake a HE course in a FE college revealed the complexity of learners' lives and how this impacted on their decision making process. Whilst learners cited a number of reasons for their choice of course and college, the most important factor was the opportunity to study locally in a community where they felt comfortable. Studying locally also reduces travel time and costs, important considerations for learners balancing work and family commitments with their studies.

When talking about their studies - and a wide range of issues relating to teaching, learning and assessment - class size, was the most important factor and the reason why many learners chose to study in the FE sector rather than the HE sector. Their rationale was that in the FE sector they would have a closer and more personal relationship with both tutors and peers, than in the HE sector where their perception was that larger class sizes would mean less contact and support from tutors. Whilst learners recognised that the quality of teaching varied they also perceived academic staff, particularly in vocational subjects, to be closer to employers and consequently have up to date industry or sector knowledge.

After location and class size, infrastructure – the physical facilities and services supporting HE in FE provision – was another reason for choosing college over university, particularly in vocational subjects. A number of factors including: tradition and mission; geographical location and estates; extent of HE provision; and budgets will influence not only the level of provision but the degree to which it is integrated or separated within individual FE colleges. When talking about facilities and services, HE in FE spoke in terms of demarcation – a separate HE area as well as differentiation and prioritisation of other services. It is not uncommon to hear postgraduate learners at HEIs express the same concerns in relation to their own institution and undergraduate students.

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