

Higher education in further education colleges: researching and developing good practice

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Introduction

Further education colleges play an increasingly important role as providers of higher education programmes. The expertise of FECs in working with diverse groups of students is now recognised, and they have been given a key role in helping to achieve the Government's target of HE participation by 50% of the 18-30 age group by 2010.

This paper discusses some of the issues arising out of a one year HEFCE project aimed at researching and developing good practice in higher education in further education colleges. The project was designed as a training and support programme for FE colleges delivering HE programmes. The three chief outcomes have been

- research into issues affecting the management and delivery of HE in FE
- a series of consultative and networking events
- Good Practice Guides for FE in HE, published by HEFCE in April 2002

Following a brief look at the background to and description of the project, this paper discusses the research undertaken and some of the key themes to emerge; it describes how the research fed into and informed further stages of the project; and it explores the impact and broader implications of the process as a whole.

Background

In 2000, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) announced details of a new £9.4 million fund intended to raise the quality and standards of HE learning and teaching within FECs, and ensure that the student experience in FECs is comparable to that in HEIs. Known as the HE in FE Development Fund, it was available to all FECs with over 100 HEFCE funded full-time equivalent students, and to consortia, for the period 1999-2000 to 2001-2. A further £18.5 million was later approved for 2001-2 and 2003-4.

As part of this initiative, HEFCE wished to support a project which would review the spending of the development fund and develop a set of materials and staff development opportunities to provide support for this area of work.

The project was undertaken by a team led by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) in partnership with University of Warwick, City College Manchester and Sheffield Hallam University. To support the project team, an advisory group was established, the membership of which included HEFCE, representatives of FE colleges, representatives from HEIs with substantial FE links, the Quality Assurance Agency, and the key FE representative organisations in England: the Association of Colleges, the Learning and Skills Development Agency, and the Mixed Economy Group of Colleges.

The Team devised a closely integrated programme of work connecting the three main elements of research (Phase One), writing materials (Phase Two) and consultation with the field (Phase Three). In the absence of national support structures with a specific remit for this area of work, the team viewed the ongoing sustainability of this area of work as an additional important objective, and during the

third phase of the project considerable thought was given to the establishment and maintenance of processes to support this work in future.

Phase One: Research

Both FE in general, and HE in FE in particular, are under-researched areas. A background paper to the project which surveyed existing literature concluded that it is “impossible to point to any evidence, on the basis of current research, into the extent to which the absence or presence of particular scholarly activities... may influence the quality of teaching and learning on HE programmes within FECs.”(Field, 2002). Nor is there work on HE in FE which has systematically identified and explored key issues from a practitioner’s perspective. A questionnaire survey was therefore carried out, to identify such issues, to seek views on the kinds of activities the project might undertake and the support materials which would be most useful, and to solicit examples of good practice which could be disseminated. A full account of the findings from the first phase of the project can be found in HEFCE April 2003/16. For the purposes of this paper there are three areas of particular interest: what constitutes a higher education environment; matters relating to staff and staff development; and issues concerned with quality and quality assurance. All three inevitably overlap, but for simplicity will be discussed separately.

To get a sense of how colleges viewed an appropriate HE ‘environment’, we asked respondents to tell us something about how their HE work differed from FE provision. The perceived distinctions revealed an extraordinarily mixed set of views. Several respondents pointed out that it was important to take into account the *level* of HE when identifying distinguishing features, suggesting that FE level 3 and HE level 1 could be seen to have more in common than the latter and honours level work.

For some the differences were straightforward, especially when seen in terms of explicit learning outcomes and the associated teaching, learning and assessment strategies. A large number of respondents saw the distinction, at least in part, as characterised by a need for HE students to demonstrate higher level key skills. Others also saw the difference in terms of what was expected of students - peer group assessment, negotiating assignments, managing their own learning, student-led seminar and group work, self reflection and so on - although some student attributes which were offered as characterising HE seemed equally applicable to FE - team work and communication skills for example.

Attempts to create an HE environment which reflected these distinctions ranged from the largely symbolic, with the introduction of HE ‘graduation’ ceremonies, to the physical, with the creation of separate HE centres within some colleges. Designated HE centres had been a successful innovation in some institutions, and were popular with HE students, although they could raise issues of equality of opportunity (in relation to both students and staff). In the majority of cases these facilities involved the relatively modest provision of work areas for HE students although in some colleges with a substantial volume of HE work, centres were geographically separate from the rest of the college, and contained a range of student support services and staff who only taught HE level work and whose contracts of employment reflected this.

A key feature of creating an appropriate HE environment within FE was seen to be the involvement of staff in what could be broadly termed ‘scholarly activity’, although there was not much in the way of a consensus as to what the phrase meant. Some saw it in the most general of terms (‘any activity designed to raise the consciousness of the person concerned in relation to the subject’), some specifically in terms of continuing professional development, others in relation to the student experience (‘that which supports and develops pedagogic practice and enriches students’ learning experiences in clearly defined ways’), while other characteristics of scholarly activity which were offered included studying for a higher degree, conference attendance, consultancy, structured curriculum development work, reading journals, writing and giving papers and action research.

There is an important distinction to be drawn between the cultivation of a general research culture in FE and scholarly activity which has a clear *subject* focus. The former is reflected in a range of activities which were reported to us, many supported by development funding. They included, for example, work on the transition between academic levels, on the market for future Foundation Degrees, on 'researching the vocational relevance of existing provision and identifying potential gaps in the overall college portfolio' and on students' expectations of higher education. The importance of updating subject skills and knowledge was recognised by many respondents as crucial and a more focused definition of scholarly activity around ensuring currency of subject knowledge, reflected in higher quality teaching, would probably be broadly supported. However, few examples were provided in the returned questionnaires of how this subject focused activity was being encouraged other than through the possibility of staff studying for a higher degree, secondments to a relevant work setting and general references to conference attendance. A small number of colleges had introduced schemes to stimulate (primarily) subject based research through, for example, setting up a college research committee and providing modest pump-priming funding for small-scale activities but, so far, these had made only modest progress.

But the biggest obstacles to cultivating an environment within which staff could engage in some form of scholarly activity were the terms of employment for staff working in FE colleges. In the colleges which responded, the pay and conditions of service of staff were, without exception, the same for those teaching HE and FE. A range of practices was used to reduce the teaching load of HE tutors, either through an allowance in terms of hours being made to programme or course team leaders or by the use of a bewildering variety of equations which linked one taught hour of HE to a higher number of timetabled hours. Despite this ingenuity the end result would still appear dauntingly high to someone from an HEI. It would be hard to concur with the respondent who, after describing how someone teaching only HE could have their hours reduced to 650 a year, could claim that as a result 'the teaching load is commensurate with the HE sector norm'. For those teaching HE only the lowest teaching load quoted by a respondent was 600 hours a year and the highest 820. The extent to which necessary staff development can be reconciled with this commitment was seen as a crucial issue. One HE manager admitted that 'this is a matter of some resentment because of the additional scholarship and updating of skills to be able to teach at this level'.

Notwithstanding the constraints, one area of staff development had received considerable attention - training in matters related to quality assurance. The priority given to this area was almost wholly attributable to the round of subject reviews being undertaken by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and the most striking feature of the information provided on quality was the polarisation between those who believed that a separate QA system for HE was essential and those who saw no difficulty in reconciling their HE and FE systems. For the former group of colleges the reason for a differentiated system lay in the nature of the approaches to assessing quality of the QAA and OFSTED/ALI: 'the key area is around the differing focus of QAA as a peer review process, as opposed to OFSTED which is an inspection. The college is still working with staff to ensure that this difference is understood'; 'it is an inspectorial model versus a peer review process - the latter is no less rigorous but presents different challenges for staff and college managers'. On the other hand many colleges reported no difficulties in reconciling the requirements of the two systems: 'the college has recently redesigned its FE quality review process - methodology and paperwork - and the process for HE courses has been built into the twice yearly course team reviews, with self assessment questions based on the prompts from the QAA SED aide memoir'.

Although it might be expected that colleges with a substantial amount of HE would be more inclined to develop a separate QA system, there was no clear evidence to support this. Nor did it appear that the adoption of a separate HE system resulted in more successful QAA aspect scores. Some colleges were convinced that 'there is no reconciliation possible' while others asserted that 'we have not encountered any major issues'.

Reflecting these concerns, phase one of the project concluded by identifying three broad areas for further development and consultation with practitioners:

The HE environment: action research, scholarly activity, creating an HE ethos, developing research skills, developing a research culture, subject research.

Teaching and Learning: assessment, pedagogy, teaching and learning strategies and implementation, higher level skills, student feedback, HE/FE joint curriculum development, peer observation, Foundation Degrees.

Quality: HE/FE differentiation, academic review preparation, self-evaluation.

Phase Two: Writing the materials

Phase Two of the project involved writing the good practice materials, based around the themes emerging from the research. From the outset it was intended that the voice of college staff should inform all aspects of the project. As the second stage got underway, therefore, a group of practitioners was brought together to contribute to the writing process. The Good Practice Guidance Working Group met five times over a period of seven months in order to consider proposals, discuss drafts and make comments on style and approach. This Group was made up of colleagues from different kinds (and sizes) of colleges: managers, practitioners and student services staff, and HEI representatives with a strong interest in and experience of working with FE colleges.

In the light of the range and complexity of the themes emerging at this stage, in particular the need to address issues of management and planning in addition to internal issues relating to pedagogy, the decision was made to produce two documents rather than one. The first document would comprise a good practice guide for practitioners and programme managers. The second would aim to meet the needs of senior managers and decision-makers for an understanding of the broader context and strategic issues to be considered. Early drafts were used as the basis for a range of consultation seminars (Phase Three) which were held across the country from May through to November 2002.

Phase Three: Consultation with HE in FE providers

The first raft of consultation events was a series of three conferences for senior managers, which provided an early opportunity to inform the field of the work being undertaken, and to discuss the initial drafts of the documents. These were followed by local seminars aimed specifically at practitioners, held in each of the nine HEFCE regions.

In addition to involving staff at all levels in discussing the draft documents, these events provided an opportunity for the project team to identify examples of good practice from HE in FE colleges which could provide case studies and exemplars of innovative activity. The intention was to build on a definition of good practice which specifically reflected examples that worked well in FECs with HE provision. This process proved harder than anticipated: FE colleagues seemed initially less than confident in offering examples of good practice, contrasting strikingly with the culture of HEIs where staff are encouraged to share and reflect on work in progress. The processes of critical reflection on HE work in FE tended to be confined to the QAA subject review process and the process of involving FE practitioners in the writing of these materials challenged the narrowness of this approach and offered opportunities for colleges to describe, reflect on and celebrate the HE work in which they were involved. In total, over 500 people commented on the documents during the process of writing and contributed to the collection of case studies.

HE in FE Good Practice Guidance documents

HEFCE 03/15: Supporting higher education in further education colleges: a guide for tutors and lecturers

The good practice guidance for practitioners produced as the outcome of this year-long process of research, writing and consultation, addresses, and illustrates through case studies, all of the themes identified in the initial research. Although presented in a revised format, these were confirmed through the consultation events as the themes on which practitioners said they would most welcome good practice guidance.

As the document points out, the diversity of HE in FE means that each colleges will have a different relationship with the good practice presented. The heterogeneity of this part of the HE sector was a recurrent theme running through discussions at all stages of the project, and one which needs to be re-emphasised, in particular, to the more powerful providers of higher education which frequently have a limited understanding of the wide range of programmes which are offered by this part of the sector.

HEFCE 03/16: Supporting higher education in further education colleges: Policy, practice and prospects

Complementing this, the guidance for FE managers considers the broader strategic issues underpinning good practice. As background, it reports on the Warwick research and also discusses some of the key issues surrounding current debates on teaching and scholarly activity.

One of the main purposes of this document was to translate the broad contextual vision into a framework to support the management of HE in FE, and offer practical guidance on effective approaches. It describes the national policy context, and highlights the two dominant themes of quality and widening participation. The chapter on strategy and planning also explores the need for the FE sector to formulate views, a voice, and ways of influencing sectoral policy and strategy, a theme which has now been taken up by HEFCE.

The theme of partnership was identified as being of particular importance. Various approaches to collaboration were explored through five in-depth case studies of consortia and HE/FE partnerships developed in different parts of England, led by both FE and by HE, leading to the identification of a number of key features underpinning successful partnerships.

Conclusions

With the publication by HEFCE of the good practice guides the project drew, formally, to a close. Inevitably, however, there were several strands which suggested that further work might be useful, while there was clearly a case for maintaining the momentum built up by the project at a time when the English white paper on higher education was expected to have significant things to say about the role of FE in HE. Three themes in particular were identified around which work might usefully continue.

Firstly, there was a recognition that any good practice guidance and associated materials would inevitably have a finite lifetime and would need regular updating. The most effective way to ensure that this happened would be through the creation of a website for HE in FE which would allow new material to be posted and revisions made. Secondly, there was a strong case to be made for creating regional networks of HE in FE practitioners to provide accessible fora for the discussion of the kinds of issue that the project had identified. Thirdly, the project had indicated a range of topics which required further research, from policy to pedagogy, and it was agreed that it would be useful to construct a 'research and practitioner agenda' which would inform future work.

The subsequent publication of the English white paper on higher education has reaffirmed the centrality of FE in any future expansion of HE, principally through the growth of Foundation Degree provision and through 'structured partnerships' between FECs and HEIs. The latter will, according to the white paper, be best achieved through indirect funding arrangements, the assumption being that these necessarily involve a partnership which provides academic support to those delivering HE in FE and thus addresses the sensitive issue of quality. Such assumptions are, however, largely untested and

would, we suspect, not find much resonance in Scotland where the development of HE in FE has occurred largely independently of the HEIs. Throughout the project, the role of HEIs in supporting higher level work in FECs has loomed large - in almost everything from curriculum development through scholarly activity to implementing quality assurance systems. Yet the evidence suggests that the FE/HE partnerships which are believed to be essential to support all these activities are of very variable quality and effectiveness. FECs offering HE provision may have moved centre stage but the supporting role of their HEI partners may need some development.

Reference

Field J (2002), *Links between further and higher education – a contextual report*, unpublished paper, DAICE, University of Stirling, p.2.