

Analysis of the emerging policies from the main parties – HE in FE

FE colleges have established a reputation for consistent delivery of HE both directly funded by HEFCE and through 'indirect funding' as a franchised partner to Universities. Colleges have been relatively successful at recruiting and retaining students targeted by government (adults, 'non-traditional students', employees), leading to a marked increase in the amount of direct funding available to colleges and being granted the ability to apply for Foundation Degree awarding powers. New College, Durham, whose Principal, John Widdowson, leads the 'Mixed Economy Group' (MEG) of leading HE in FE providers and led the successful lobbying for FD awarding powers, will be the first to go through the process, followed by six or seven MEG and/or 157 Group colleges.

Politicians in all parties now perceive HE in FE as economically viable and politically desirable due to its impact on widening participation.

Current statistics

124 colleges are in receipt of HEFCE direct funding in 2009/10, totalling £185m, a 5.14% increase from 2008/09, with a total of 52,000 students undertaking directly HE courses in colleges. 146 colleges deliver franchised - indirectly funded - work to 56,000 students, leaving some 91 (out of 363) colleges with no HE provision at all.

The 2006 target for participation in Foundation Degree (FD) courses was 100,000 by 2010, which is well on the way to being met, with over 80,000 FD enrolments in 2007-08.

HE income in colleges represents a significant part of colleges' total income: HE tuition fees, franchised income and HEFCE direct teaching grants amounted to just over £500m in 2007/08. In addition, colleges are funded to deliver teacher education, particularly in the Post Compulsory Education and Training (PCET) sector, and may also receive a variable amount from the LSC for 'non-designated' professional education courses, but the LSC is trying to push these Level 4 courses into becoming exclusively full-cost recovery programmes.

Taking FDs and franchised honours degree programmes together, over 11% of the current undergraduate population is studying HE in FE, which would be increased by a further 10,000 HE students in FECs if all the 'New University Challenge' HE Centre proposals eventually went forward.

The 2009-10 HEFCE teaching funding grant for HE in FE is £184,174,000, of which WP and student success funding is £25,959,000, an overall increase for 2009/10 of 3.1%.

A 2007 HEFCE survey showed that in the academic year 2004-05:

- 62% of students studied full-time
- 46% were taught wholly or partly at higher education institutions (HEIs) and 54 per cent wholly at further education colleges (FECs)
- almost half were studying the three most common subjects: education, business and art and design
- 95% of full-time students were on programmes of two years or shorter
- 72% of part-time students were on programmes of three years or shorter
- distance learning was the main means of study for 15 per cent of part-time students.

For home entrants to programmes in the academic year 2004-05 HEFCE found:

- 57% were female
- 64% were aged 21 or over when they started their course
- the proportion of entrants from low participation neighbourhoods was higher than generally found in undergraduate programmes.

Student feedback on the quality of programmes:

- 76% of FD students in their final year who responded to the 2006 National Student Survey were 'overall satisfied with the quality of the course'
- Just over half (52%) agreed with the statement, 'the course is well organised and is running smoothly'.

Progression through FDs:

- For entrants in 2003-04 following a full-time, two-year programme, 50% received a higher education (HE) award by 2004-05. Almost all of these were FD awards. A further 27 per cent were still studying at HE level, mostly for a FD. For part-time students on three-year courses who entered in 2002-03, slightly lower proportions of students had received an HE qualification (48%), or were still studying at HE level (30%) by 2004-05.

Progression from FDs to Honours Degree programmes:

- Over half (54%) of the students registered at an HEI who qualified with a FD in 2003-04 went on to study an honours degree in 2004-05.
- Of those FD qualifiers registered at an HEI who went into the final year of an honours programme in 2004-05, 71 per% were reported as graduating in that year.

Employment outcomes after FD graduation:

- Nearly half of the FD qualifiers in employment were in graduate jobs, with about 90% stating 'positive' reasons for taking the job.
- Apart from male qualifiers from part-time study, salary levels were low. The median pro rata salary was typically £14,000 to £15,000 per year for full-time male and both full- and part-time female qualifiers.

However, the scenario 'finish studying, start working' does not apply to most FD qualifiers as most had the same employer as before and/or during their period of study. Many FD programmes are designed for associate professionals such as health and social carers, nursery supervisors and teaching assistants, who are often in low paid occupations.

Employer student support:

- From the 2006 Destination of Leavers from HE survey HEFCE found that most 2004-05 qualifiers from part-time study (77%) had some support from their employers, such as study leave, but only 28% received any financial support.
- From the student records HEFCE estimated the proportion of part-time students at HEIs that have their fee paid by their employers at 23%-26%. The proportion of students at FECs whose employers pay the fees is about half this. Employer fee payment is much less common for full-time students.

Future government expectations of HE in FE

The Conservatives

Both John Hayes and David Willetts have regularly spoken of the need to increase the numbers studying HE in FE. Hayes has often described FE provision as the best way to expand access to HE and has also argued that there should be a greater level of direct funding of HE in FE, summed up in:

'FE colleges are uniquely placed to serve those whose lives do not fit traditional forms of university learning'. (Speech at Birkbeck, 2008)

David Willetts (January, 2009), commenting on the lack of a UCAS endorsed access route from apprenticeships (now a feature of the Government's 'Higher Ambitions' paper for 35,000 students), said:

'We will provide £20 million a year (by Year 3 in power) for 1,200 HE Scholarships, allowing us to quadruple the number of apprentices entering HE each year. That is more bursaries available, through employers, for qualified apprentices to fund part-time study. A decision to go into FE or an apprenticeship does not have to be a final decision – apprentices can go to university too.'

Willetts also pushed for the Review of HE fees to include the needs of part-time students.

The Liberal Democrats

The Lib Dems have proposed merging FE funding (post-19) with HEFCE to establish a 'Council for Adult Skills and Higher Education' and developing a credit-based framework for learning across FE and HE. In September, Nick Clegg launched a new policy paper which proposed:

- Funding 50,000 more college-based FD places
- Allowing colleges to make direct bids to HEFCE to fund modules
- Making it easier for colleges to gain FD awarding powers, allowing them to form consortia to do so

Current Government policies

The Milburn Report on (stalled) social mobility, the HE Framework 'Higher Ambitions', the Skills Strategy and Foundation Degree Awarding Powers are encapsulated in Lord Mandelson's speech in the House of Lords, 3 November 2009:

'...the challenge for the next decade is to offer a wider range of study opportunities – part-time, work-based, foundation degrees and studying whilst at home – to a greater range of people. So we will encourage the expansion of routes from apprenticeships and vocational qualifications to higher education, and offer more higher education in further education colleges'.

Conclusion

All the parties seem committed to the concept and expansion of HE in FE but have not offered detailed analysis of how this would happen in a period of greatly reduced public expenditure coinciding with the run up to a general election.

Analysis and Critique

There is a powerful lobbying coalition composed of national FE employer organisations pushing the HE in FE agenda to government and the major parties. The AoC, along with the MEG and the 157 Group (of 28 'high performing' colleges), have consistently lobbied all parties on the expansion of HE in FE.

The AoC's response to a senior DBIS official's question – 'Do FECs have a built-in structural advantage in the delivery of HE that comes from being a FEC? – throws considerable light on both how AoC members view HE in FE staff pay and conditions, and how they are shaping the parties' views of HE in FE as a low cost, high quality widening participation higher skills strategy:

'...colleges have a lower cost base. All of their resources are devoted to teaching and student support. College staff are teachers, not researchers, and they develop

their skills accordingly...because of the greater number of hours taught by staff, the flexible approaches taken to staffing by colleges and lower salary and facility costs, college-delivered HE provision is cheaper and offers better value for money for all concerned’.

‘A high level of staff-student contact time is a feature of HE in FE’ and ‘The level and quality of support for non-traditional HE learners is much more intensive and specialised than that found in conventional HEIs.’

‘Many FE staff are employed on flexible contracts. Incorporation [in 1993] enabled FECs to employ a range of staff on a range of contracts...all full-time staff are employed on FE terms and conditions, which require (on average) 22 hours per week of timetabled teaching. Few are recruited solely to teach at HE level, with the result that most work across the college in their subject area and facilitate the progression of learners from lower levels of study.’

FECs are able to employ experts, ‘recruiting staff with current and credible skills rather than using a large component of the college budget to fund staff to undertake academic research’.

UCU policy

UCU has always held the position that FDs and HE in FE are a welcome development in widening participation and access terms but that HE in FE ‘should not be HE on the cheap’. So it is unfortunate that the AoC has chosen to meld the considerable widening participation strengths of HE in FE, FDs and the way that FECs deliver them with an argument that suppresses the terms and conditions of academic staff.

UCU has developed policy and is conducting research amongst our HE in FE members to ensure that HE in FE staff have clear and comprehensive access to remitted time away from teaching to engage in necessary scholarly activity and research that will deepen and update both their subject knowledge and pedagogy to consistently underwrite a high quality learning experience for all HE in FE students.