



University and College Union

‘Further, higher, better’

**Submission to the government’s
second Comprehensive Spending
Review**

Section 15

15 The further and higher education interface

There are some significant areas of overlap between further and higher education. In 2004-5 in the UK there were more than 130,000 students at further education level who were studying in a higher education institution. In England alone, in 2003-4, there were more than 60,000 students at a higher education level who were studying in a further education college, and the growth of Foundation Degrees means that HE in FE is set to expand.

Both sectors have their own areas of expertise and have differing advantages for learners and students, with higher education able to offer learning in a research-enriched environment, and further education more geared to offering local and more flexible learning programmes.

We note the comments of Professor Gareth Parry in a 'think piece' for the Foster Review: 'As a result of the movement of higher education from elite to mass and now near-universal levels of access, the concept of further education has become increasingly redundant. Higher education is now a distributed system and the two sectors resemble overlapping and intersecting zones, rather than functionally separate territories. The notion of further education is a survival from a different era and it should be abandoned in favour of an open system of colleges and universities. If the aim is to promote a more differentiated, articulated and networked pattern of higher and post-secondary education, there is little sense in holding to a redundant category, especially if it might hinder widening participation and lifelong learning.'⁸¹

Further education in higher education

Further education students in higher education institutions are those on programmes of study for which the level of instruction is equal to or below that of level 3 of the National Qualifications Framework, ie courses leading to the General Certificate of Education or Vocational Certificate of Education A-level, or the Advanced Higher Grade and Higher Grade of the Scottish Qualifications Authority. This includes students studying non-accredited and non-approved higher education qualifications.⁸²

In 2004-5 in the UK there were 29,000 full-time and 107,050 part-time further education students in higher education institutions. Although they represented only 2.0% of full-time students in UK higher education institutions (1.1% in 1996-7), they represented 11.2% of part-time students (4.4% in 1996-7).

The FE-in-HE students in England were predominantly in specialist higher education institutions, such as art and education colleges, and in former polytechnics. In 2004-5, for example, the University of the Arts, London, reported 9,515 part-time FE-in-HE students, and Leeds Metropolitan University had 18,800 part-time FE-in-HE students. 62% of all students at Thames Valley University in 2004-5 were classified as FE-in-HE.

By contrast in Wales, the great majority of FE-in-HE students were in 'pre-92' institutions – particularly at Aberystwyth, Bangor, Cardiff and Swansea. At the 'post-92' University of Glamorgan, on the other hand, there were only 70 part-time FE-in-HE students – less than 1% of all students there.

There has been considerable growth in FE-in-HE since the mid-1990s. Numbers of full-time FE-in-HE students in the UK grew by more than 130% between 1996-7 and 2004-5. Numbers of part-time FE-in-HE students in the UK grew by more than 270% between 1996-7 and 2004-5. The great majority of FE-in-HE students are in England and Wales; their numbers are very small and declining in Scotland (a situation closely linked to the Scottish education system, with one-year Highers, four-year degree courses, and a strong further education sector – see below) and non-existent in Northern Ireland. The growth of part-time FE-in-HE students in England and Wales has been particularly dramatic, with Welsh part-timers rising by 380% over the period.

Further education students in higher education institutions

	England		Wales		Scotland		NI	
	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time
1996-7	11,833	26,631	520	1,513	85	320	0	0
2004-5	28,545	99,700	390	7,265	65	80	0	0
96-7 to 04-5 % change	141.2%	274.4%	-25.0%	380.2%	-23.5%	-75.0%		

	UK		UK		UK	
	Full-time	Part-time	All Full-time	All Part-time	FE as % of total in HEIs	FE as % of total in HEIs
					Full-time	Part-time
1996-7	12,438	28,464	1,151,009	646,073	1.1%	4.4%
2004-5	29,000	107,050	1,420,505	952,070	2.0%	11.2%
96-7 to 04-5 % change	133.2%	276.1%	23.4%	47.4%		

Source: HESA, Students in Higher Education Institutions 1996-7, 2004-5, Table 0a; percentage calculations by UCU.

Higher education in further education

In 2003-4, there were about 66,000 full-time and part-time higher education students in further education colleges in England. They comprised about 3% of full-time and 1% of part-time students in further education. The numbers of full-time and part-time higher education students in further education colleges in England have decreased overall in recent years. Between 2000-1 and 2003-4, the total number of full-time HE students in FE colleges dropped by 13%, and the total number of part-time HE in FE students fell by 5%. Only among postgraduate HE students in FE colleges was there strong growth over the period, but the numbers of these students are small.

Higher education in further education colleges, England (thousands)

	2000-1 actual		2001-2 Actual		2002-3 actual		2003-4 provisional	
	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time
Postgraduate	0.5	2.4	0.6	2.9	0.5	3.9	0.6	4.0
First degree	12.3	3.7	12.0	3.8	10.8	3.2	10.6	3.9
Other u/grad	22.2	32.0	24.7	36.5	21.7	31.1	19.1	28.3
Total	35.0	38.2	37.2	43.2	33.0	38.2	30.3	36.2

Source: DFES departmental report 2005, Annex Q

Changes in higher education students in further education colleges, England

	2000-1 to 2003-4	
	Full-time	Part-time
	Change	Change
	%	%
Postgraduate	20.0%	66.7%
First degree	-13.8%	5.4%
Other u/grad	-14.0%	-11.6%
Total	-13.4%	-5.2%

Source: DFES departmental report 2005, Annex Q; UCU percentage calculations

These data are somewhat at odds with the picture of HE in FE provided by a report in April 2003 by the Higher Education Funding Council for England, which said: 'Following the recommendations of the Dearing Committee that FECs should be given 'a special mission' in the expansion of sub-degree higher education, there has been a marked growth in the numbers of students who pursue higher education courses within FECs and in the variety of programmes offered by the colleges.'⁸³ The HEFCE report went on to say that FE colleges had been successful in recruiting and teaching non-traditional students, and 'are able to do so at a lower cost than HEIs'. As a result, FECs were seen as vital in helping to achieve the government's (then) target that 50% of 18-30 year-olds should participate in higher education by 2010. 'This is because of their proven track record in recruiting students from under-represented groups, their local accessibility, supportive and flexible methods of delivery, and close contacts with local schools, employers and HEIs.'⁸⁴

Nevertheless, the role of FE colleges in widening participation in higher education is significant. The FE-HE 'think piece' for the Foster Review in 2005 found that, given their accessibility to local students, their mainly short-cycle and part-time modes, their vocational orientation and their lower entry requirements, 'there is evidence to suggest that higher education programmes offered by further education sector colleges attract a larger proportion of 'widening participation' students than higher education sector institutions.'⁸⁵

In England, the Higher Education Funding Council for England is responsible for funding higher education courses in further education colleges. Total grant to further education colleges from the Higher Education Funding Council for England will be £151.7m in 2006-7.⁸⁶ This is approximately 3% of HEFCE total grant. Total HEFCE grant to FE colleges in 2002-3 was £135m, also 3%

of total HEFCE grant. Between 2002-3 and 2006-7, HEFCE grant to FE colleges grew by 12.6%.

Through the HE in FE development fund, HEFCE has provided money to help build capacity in FE colleges for the delivery of HE provision at colleges with more than 100 full-time equivalent HE student provision. This funding stream was established in 1999-2000. Priorities for development were: higher education growth; a higher education ethos and environment; staff development; curriculum development; and systems infrastructure. The sums involved in the fund were fairly modest: £8.7m in 2003-4; £10m was earmarked for capital spending in 2004-5. This funding initiative has now been consolidated into HEFCE's recurrent grant for teaching for FE colleges.

The main development in the HE-in-FE area in England has been the introduction of the two-year (if full-time) Foundation Degree (FD) courses, largely provided in FE colleges, but validated by HE institutions. FD courses began in the autumn of 2001, with 4,300 students enrolled on them.⁸⁷ The DfES says: 'Foundation Degrees are developed in collaboration with employers and target higher level skills shortages. They are validated by HEIs to ensure that they meet standards. Employers value them for their hands-on vocational focus that enables graduates to make an immediate contribution to their enterprises.'⁸⁸

By 2004-5, there were some 38,000 students on FDs. By 2005-6 the DfES wanted there to be 50,000 full-time equivalent FD places. Their significance in the government's plans can be seen from the numbers of publicly funded new places in higher education in England for 2006-7. For that year, HEFCE is planning an additional 20,300 funded full-time equivalent higher education students. Of these, 10,500 – ie more than 50% - are to be on FDs. The DfES has made it clear that it wants FDs to overtake Higher National Diplomas in numerical and proportionate terms.⁸⁹ Funding has been made available through HEFCE for replacing HNDs with Foundation Degrees (Foundation Degree Forward development – allocated £6m in 2005-6).⁹⁰

The FDs are seen by the government as being a major contributor to the 50% participation target. From 2006, any FEC wishing to charge undergraduate variable top-up fees up to the maximum level will have to have an access agreement in place with the Office for Fair Access. To date few have asked for this.⁹¹

The most recent round of academic reviews by the Quality Assurance Agency of directly funded higher education in FECs reported confidence in the academic standards of over 90% of the programmes reviewed.⁹²

According to the Association of Scottish Colleges, more than 25% of all higher education provision is delivered by Scotland's colleges. 'It is due to the contribution of colleges that Scotland can boast that over 50% of 17-21 year olds go on to higher education. A key element of Scotland's strategy for lifelong learning is the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework.'⁹³

In Scotland, 72,000 (17%) of the 435,000 students in further education colleges were at higher education level in 1999-2000.⁹⁴ By 2004-5, student numbers had dipped, with 55,600 (14%) of 407,900 students in further education in Scotland at higher education level (along with a further 5,200 at the newly-established University of the Highlands Millenium Institute – ‘a partnership of colleges providing higher education level courses’).⁹⁵

Comment

Our aspiration for further and higher education, and the growing links between the two sectors, is that every effort should be made to facilitate the passage of students through the education system. This is in the interests of improving the skill set of the people of the UK through their adult lives, and in the interests of doing as much as possible to widen participation in further and higher education.

We acknowledge the generally growing links in educational provision between the further and higher education sectors. We consider that higher education, of an appropriate level, adequately resourced and rigorously evaluated, should be recognised as part of the work of further education colleges. In particular, we recognise the crucial role further education colleges have in widening participation in higher education. But given the scale and diversity of the further and higher education sectors in the UK, particularly in England, it may not be appropriate to impose clear-cut boundaries governing the types of higher education carried out in further education colleges, and vice versa.

We emphasise that where higher education takes place in a further education environment, that this is appropriately funded, so that the education experience is of comparable quality with higher education in an HEI. There must on no account be a reduction of the unit of teaching resource for higher education students in further education colleges. The adequate teaching resource is needed so that library materials, ICT, staff development and general teaching infrastructure for HE in FE are on a par with HE in HE.

For appropriate delivery of HE in FE to flourish, overall resourcing is key. We note the current review by HEFCE of HE in FE and urge that it include consideration of the resources necessary for the effective delivery of HE in FE. This must include consideration of the needs of FE staff in terms of HE-equivalent workloads, opportunities for professional development and scholarship and for participation in a research culture. To this end, we recommend an investigation into the provision of HE in FE to determine ways in which relevant FE staff can be encouraged and enabled to take part in research activities, in conjunction with HE partners.

Furthermore, as has been identified by the Mixed Economy group of FE colleges, not only must HE provision in FECs continue to be funded at the same unit of resource as that delivered in HEIs, but there is an urgent need to provide equitable and comparable capital funding to ensure that students studying in FECs get access to the same quality of teaching and learning infrastructure as their counterparts in universities.

We urge government departments, funding bodies and other relevant organisations to work together so that policies for funding and quality assurance enable further and higher education institutions to collaborate effectively and efficiently.

We note the larger proportion of students at higher education level in the Scottish FE sector (14%), when compared with England (3%). This suggests that there is a better articulated route into higher education via further education in Scotland than in England. This is likely, given the development in recent years of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework, linking education from level 1 through to level 5 with a credit points system which facilitates movement from, for example, further education courses onto degree programmes.

The DfES White Paper in 2006, *Further education: raising skills, improving life chances*, acknowledged the need for a clearer and more widely understood qualifications framework linking FE and HE. We note the commitment of the DfES to develop a more comprehensible system – the Framework for Achievement – and we look forward to participating in the preparatory work for that.

We note the recent merger of further and higher education funding bodies in Scotland. We recommend that the impact of the merger is evaluated after the first 12 months of operation of the Scottish Funding Council.

We support the following recommendations in the Foster Review, that:

- FE colleges, working collaboratively with Higher Education Institutions, should improve learner pathways to higher education to facilitate progression. (p. 81)
- The LSC should continue its work with HEFCE to improve learner pathways to higher education to facilitate progression. (p. 84)
- HEFCE and LSC, colleges and universities should expedite work to ensure clear learner pathways exist across the country to enable progression to higher levels. (p89)

We urge continuing support for the development of Lifelong Learning networks, and for FE Colleges to enjoy equitable partnership arrangements in the planning and delivery of Foundation Degrees

We recommend that the four countries of the UK work towards the adoption of a UK-wide credit and qualification framework, linking school, further and higher education in a way that is easy to understand and to use, as a major contribution to widening participation in education and enabling people to obtain the skills they need for life. We recommend that additional public funds are made available to support this recommendation.

We recommend that each country in the UK has an expanded version of HEFCE's HE in FE development fund, to provide a level of funding for HE students in FE colleges that is equivalent to the appropriate unit of funding for HE students in HE institutions, providing for excellent resources and learning materials (including library facilities), ICT, infrastructure and staff development.