



1. Summary

This submission is from the Mixed Economy Group of FE Colleges (MEG). It focuses on our view of the future shape of HE in England and thus our thinking on the content of the HE White Paper. We see a distinctive role for FE colleges in the delivery of HE and we set out our thinking in the form of a Summary statement and accompanying evidence.

1.1 About the Mixed Economy Group.

The Mixed Economy Group of colleges represents those Further Education Colleges which have a significant, established, strategic and developmental role in the provision of Higher Education. Member colleges focus on the complementary aims of widening participation amongst groups and individuals currently under-represented in Higher Education and working with employers to ensure that higher level skills are developed and recognised in the workplace. There are currently 39 colleges in MEG membership

1.2 Our overall response to the Terms of Reference for the inquiry:

1.21 (a) *The conclusions of the Browne Report and the content of the Government's proposed White Paper on Higher Education (including the Government's proposals for widening participation and access)*

1.23 The Mixed Economy Group welcomes many aspects of the Browne Report, in particular the opportunities for a more diverse HE landscape which can respond to the needs of learners with differing aspirations and expectations. We believe it is essential that the systems and structures for the design and delivery of HE are made more open and accessible and not simply derived from the traditional model based on three year full time honours provision. As FE Colleges, MEG members enroll students from their local communities who might not otherwise be able or willing to study. They provide higher level skills qualifications in a range of vocational disciplines to support local employers. Colleges also offer value for money by focusing on teaching and learning, with smaller class sizes and longer student contact hours. Colleges also understand the needs of students for support in their learning and offer a real alternative to a "traditional" HE experience. Part time and mature students feature strongly in the college offer.

1.24 In terms of promoting student progression to HE, colleges play a major role in the social mobility agenda shared by all political parties. Some colleges have progression rates of 33% for students moving from the college's own Level 3 provision to college-based HE. Given that the majority of these students do not come from families with a

tradition of University education, this is a major contribution to local social and economic development.

1.25 On balance, MEG supported the original conclusion of the Browne Review that a true market should prevail in the delivery of HE. This abolished the existing concept of Student Number Controls and would allow those of our members who cannot, under current constraints, meet a growing demand for local HE courses to do so. It also did away with the concept of direct and indirect funding and thus the constraints imposed on us by the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. Whilst we disagreed with the concept of a tariff for those seeking admission to HE without UCAS points, we understood the need for a levy on fees above £6,000 and the contribution that this would make to the funding of HE.

1.26 Our colleges offer high quality HE (our QAA IQER judgments are as good as, if not better than, those made by QAA under their traditional Institutional Review of University provision) and we do so in a cost-effective way. MEG therefore anticipates a greater role for colleges of FE in providing higher education, building on these strengths. Our reasons are set out in more detail in our Supporting Commentary.

1.27 *(b) The role and future of state funding in Higher Education.*

1.28 MEG has concerns that the new fees regime could act as a disincentive to students drawn from backgrounds historically underrepresented in Higher Education. Although the impact of new Access Agreements and National Scholarship Funds cannot yet be judged, there are concerns that the inevitable bureaucracy which surrounds all such schemes will act as a further disincentive for such students.

1.29 There are also issues around arrangements for part time students. It is proposed that students are able to access support when studying at “25% intensity” (it is assumed this will be defined by the pro rata number of credits studied i.e. 30 credits per annum.) This is a relatively low level and as such is likely to include much of the provision which is currently delivered part time. The financial implications of this are unknown. In addition, removal of the HEFCE Teaching Grant is likely to result in significant increases in the fees charged to students. The relatively high level of fee support under the current fees regime means that the price to students (and their employers) can be maintained at lower levels.

1.30 It is also uncertain as to how employers will be able to pay the fees of their employees without incurring a penalty for early repayment. Such a penalty would be perverse, given the drive to encourage employers to assume financial responsibility for their employees’ training.

1.31 MEG understands the pressures on public funding. However, some of the implications of the new funding approach carry significant risk that students from widening participation backgrounds will be more reluctant to participate.

2. Supporting commentary

2.1 MEG colleges offer high quality HE provision and also a rapid-response to employer needs for higher-level skills. They do this as a result of the particular nature of

their staff structures, the varied backgrounds of their staff, their approach to teaching and learning and their culture of employer engagement at L2 – L4. All of these factors combine to enable them to offer value for money to both learners and employers.

2.2 Staff Structures

2.21 Incorporation enabled FECs to employ a range of staff on a range of contracts – some are recruited as teachers on nationally-agreed pay scales, others as instructors, assessors or business support staff. Part time staff who are current practitioners in their field provide a significant element of the teaching staff. All full-time teaching 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 to higher levels of study. A high level of staff-student contact time is a feature of HE in FE.

2.22 FECs teach year round and outside of normal working hours. Despite their varied backgrounds, staff have a shared commitment to teaching and learning, which is viewed as the prime activity of all college staff at both FE and HE level.

2.3 Staff Backgrounds

2.31 HE in FE staff do not always enter teaching directly from an academic background. Most have relevant industrial experience, giving them immediate credibility with employers working within the same sector. They are able to contextualise the more academic learning undertaken by students, helping them to see the point of theoretical components in largely vocational courses.

2.32 FECs are able to recruit experts in their field when needed. The focus is on recruiting staff with current and credible skills rather than using a large component of the college budget to fund staff to undertake academic research. College teaching staff are recruited primarily as teachers and almost all have teaching qualifications, this being a requirement for employment as a teacher within the FE sector. Discussions with the NUS have demonstrated that HE in FE students value teaching skills.

2.33 An HE in FE professional is emerging, who is at the cutting edge of his/her profession and has expectations in terms of CPD but wishes to teach rather than focus on traditional academic research.

2.4 Approaches to learning and teaching

2.41 Responsive, dynamic timetabling and access to skilled staff employed on flexible terms and conditions enables FECs to address market needs rapidly.

2.42 Like some HEIs, FECs also work closely with Chartered Institutes and other professional bodies, thereby ensuring that course content is always up-to date and acting as a bridge between employees and relevant bodies in terms of CPD. Impact is enhanced by the industry-active status of many PT FE staff.

2.43 In certain institutions the higher skills offer clearly helps to fill regional skills gaps that HEIs are unable or unwilling to address. The currency of the HE in FE offer in the

form of Foundation degrees is strong: it is subject to annual review and regular updates, ensuring that it meets the needs of a changing job market.

2.44 In the North East, as in the South West, it is the FE sector which is addressing HE cold spots, through the provision of a range of vocational courses which can be pursued on a full time, part-time or distance learning basis.

2.45 The level and quality of support for non-traditional HE learners is much more intensive and specialised than that found in conventional HEIs. The support structures continue through from FE and can remain in place for the duration of each student's higher-level study. The emphasis on retention and achievement is much more pronounced than in HEIs.

2.46 Student retention and success has a much higher profile with course management teams that deliver HE in FE, due to the degree of internal and external scrutiny driven by Ofsted Inspections in all other aspects of their work. The same approach is carried through to HE provision

2.47 Lower staff costs allow the delivery of more contact hours. Teaching and learning is the core purpose of most HE in FE and not Research, as in many HEIs.

2.48 With regards to learner progression into employment or upskilling, FECs and the students who choose to study there place a distinct emphasis on jobs and employability for graduates, usually aligned to local job markets. Promotion and career progression are regarded as important for those already in work but studying part-time

2.49 Only HE in FE will provide the capacity and expertise to ensure the increased progression from the massive expansion in the Apprentices programmes from 14+.

2.5 Employer Engagement

2.51 FE Colleges work with employers: this is part of their identity and comes from a long tradition dating back in many cases to the early years of the last century or earlier. For much of their history they have worked with part-time as well as full time adults, and are aware of the particular needs of those who are learning whilst earning.

2.56 Crucial to this is the degree of confidence that employers have in their local colleges. This is hard-won, and reflects a heavy investment in time by business support staff, tutors and assessors, who all nurture the HE/employer relationship. The proven ability of FECs to re-tool to meet new demands rapidly and to a high standard maintains this crucial factor.

2.57 Finally, apprenticeship numbers are set to increase significantly. A key role for colleges will come in ensuring that routes exist to higher level technical qualifications for the young people and adults who are recruited to this scheme. It is unlikely that HEIs will have the staff expertise to rise to this challenge, particularly in areas where there is not a tradition of higher-level qualifications.

2.6 Value for money

2.61 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. College resources are directed towards the success of their students, without the distraction of primary research or the need to publish papers. 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 offers better value for money for all concerned.

3. Conclusions

The role of Colleges in the delivery of HE can be summarised as:

- Working locally with communities and employers
- Providing progression routes for students from FE levels 1-3 to higher technician levels, for both full-time students and part-time students in employment
- Employing tutors and other professional staff who are often actively employed elsewhere, undertaking relevant professional/higher technical skills and activities which can be contextualised into the teaching/learning process
- Delivering the majority of apprenticeship programmes across the country. They are therefore best-positioned to develop and deliver progression routes to higher-skills development locally
- Responding rapidly to the needs of employers and government when resourced to do so (e.g. response to the closure of Rover in the West Midlands).

4 Recommendations

In order to develop this established position, the HE White Paper needs to address the following:

- More flexible approaches to funding, recognising that one size does not fit all for HE study and that local study, without the burden of debt, will be an attractive proposition for some non-traditional HE learners
- More direct funding for Colleges, as suggested by the Browne Review, so that the amount of resources spent on unnecessary inter-institutional bureaucracy can be minimised and funds devoted to where they are best used to support learning
- Changes in the rules preventing Colleges working in consortium or franchise arrangements with other Colleges. Economies of scale can then be increased and partnership working developed without the need to engage closely with HEIs over provision and students with which the HEIs are often unfamiliar

- A similar approach to consortium working for the powers afforded under the Further Education and Training Act, 2007
- Amending existing legislation in order to enable colleges to respond to employer needs more rapidly by offering funded modules or units of provision, as HEIs are currently able to do.

John Widdowson,

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