

**THE CASE FOR HE IN FE**  
**Frequently Asked Questions**

**1. What is HE?**

We define Higher Education as provision above Level 3 that is validated by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) or awarding bodies, including professional bodies. This presents a spectrum of provision which ranges from traditional academic courses with a focus on individual learning guided by tutors, to a more vocational range of programmes which are delivered to industry and professional body standards. These are often led by teaching staff who are still active in their profession. Similarly, students range in motivation from those who wish to pursue a subject for its own sake, to those who see HE as a means to an end in terms of career progression.

The Government increasingly views HE as contributing to the economy through developing higher-level technical skills. The importance of higher level skills in economic recovery was underlined in the recently published papers “Higher Ambition<sup>1</sup>” and “Skills for Growth<sup>2</sup>”. HE can be delivered by publicly or privately funded universities, by FE Colleges, or by employers; it can also be delivered through residential, work-based or distance learning, or through a mix of means.

**2. What is HE in FE?**

HEFCE has identified the distinctiveness of HE taught in FE Colleges (FECs):

“HE students in FECs are more likely to be over 25, more likely to study part-time, and more likely to come from areas with low rates of participation in HE than students in HEIs. They are more likely to be studying foundation degrees and sub-degree programmes such as HNCs and HNDs. These distinctive features derive from the particular place that FECs occupy in their communities and the nature of the FE curriculum on which the HE provision is often based. They lie in the extent to which FECs’ focus on short-cycle HE enables them to offer more higher level learning within a context of lifelong learning, to respond swiftly to skills needs, to deliver programmes flexibly, and to work effectively within a turbulent market. We believe these distinctive features constitute a particular strength and should continue to provide the focus of HE in FECs. In addition to being more effective than HE generally in reaching out to learners and offering them distinctive forms of provision, FECs have a particular strength and role in meeting the needs of employers.”<sup>3</sup>

HE delivered in FE Colleges tends to focus on career development, comprising mainly vocational provision at Levels 4 & 5 such as Foundation degrees, but with some Colleges offering Honours degrees, post-graduate programmes or higher national and professional awards. About 8% of undergraduate education is delivered as HE in FE. In 2007-07 HEFCE provided direct funding to 124

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<sup>1</sup> Higher Ambitions. The future of universities in a knowledge economy. Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. November 2009

<sup>2</sup> Skills for Growth. The national skills strategy. Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. November 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Higher Education in further education colleges. HEFCE. November 2006/48

FE Colleges and a further 162 received funding through franchise agreements with partner Universities.

### **3. Who funds HE in FE?**

- Most HE delivered in FE is funded by HEFCE.
- Colleges receive HEFCE funding in one of two ways, directly from HEFCE or indirectly through a partner HEI. The HE provision offered by Colleges is partly dependent on how they receive their funding.
- Directly funded provision is constrained by the Education Prescribed Courses of Higher Education Regulations 1998<sup>4</sup> which prescribes that Colleges may only be funded to deliver whole qualifications. Colleges funded indirectly through an HEI can offer short courses or modules on behalf of the HEI.
- The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) can also fund HE. It has a power, but not a duty, to fund professional qualifications at higher levels such as those awarded by the professional Institutes, e.g. Housing, Marketing, and Accounting. This type of HE is described as Non-Prescribed HE. There are clearly challenges for the Skills Funding Agency to formulate a clear role and response to higher level skills
- Some provision is contracted and funded by other bodies such as the NHS or the Training and Development Agency for schools and some, particularly professional qualifications, may be fully-funded by employers and employees.

### **3. Is it something new?**

- Colleges have offered professional qualifications for much of their history: this is a natural continuation from the technical education which some have delivered for more than a century.
- The provision of HNDs and HNCs was a feature of Colleges in the 1970s and HEFCE-funded provision (such as degrees) has been available since the mid 1990s.
- The arrival of Foundation degrees in 2001, coupled with a greater level of government interest in the development of higher level skills, saw the beginning of a period of growth for HE in FE.
- The publication of the Leitch review of skills in 2006, with its comment that 70% of the 2020 work force had already left statutory education, emphasised the importance of FE Colleges in meeting the need to raise skill levels in the workplace. Leitch recommends that 40% of the workforce should be in possession of a higher-level skill by 2020.
- “Higher Ambitions” and “Skills for Growth” both confirm the importance of higher level skills and by extension the role of providers such as Colleges. They launch a new period of expansion, where attention is focused on those already in work.

### **4. Who are the students and how many are there?**

The HEFCE definition given above encapsulates the nature of HE in FE. In many Colleges the majority of students are people at work who are studying on a part-time basis, being trained to reach higher skill levels. The balance is made up of full-time students many of whom follow a progression route from full-time Level 3 vocational programmes. Many have taken a deliberate decision to pursue HE in their local College as this enables them to study close to home and thus at lower cost. Many young students live at home with parents whilst older learners often have families of their own and financial commitments which preclude moving away to study. The following table shows recruitment patterns in HE in FE:

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<sup>4</sup> The Education (Prescribed Courses of Higher Education) (Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 1998 (SI 1998/1970).

Academic year	LSC funded and other sources of funding	Direct HEFCE funded	Indirect HEFCE funding	Total
2002/03	85,805	53,410	43,625	182,840
2003/04	87,050	56,015	46,550	189,615
2004/05	83,580	56,910	49,755	190,245
2005/06	83,035	55,270	51,225	189,530
2006/07	74,300	55,935	52,795	183,030
2007/08	65,410	56,735	55,855	178,000

(Figures are headcounts)

HEFCE-funded numbers are rising, but those funded by LSC are declining year on year. HE in FE numbers are always difficult to identify accurately as a result of the two data collection systems that apply between Colleges and Universities. Numbers dipped with the introduction of Foundation degrees but now seem to be rising again, albeit less rapidly than within Universities. The most likely explanation for this effect is the funding system, which prefers numbers to be franchised from a partner University rather than given directly to Colleges by HEFCE. This can lead to inaccurate reporting but also puts the University in control of allocating student numbers to Colleges - and thus determining the nature of the courses that they offer. In this respect, Colleges which have been at the forefront of meeting employer needs in their locality and are viewed as proactive in recognising new training needs are suddenly not in charge of their own destinies when the same employers express an interest in higher-level skills. A conflict of interest may arise with the partner University, particularly when there is competition for enrolments.

## 5. What qualifications do they achieve?

The majority are following vocational, work-related or work-based courses. These include Foundation Degrees, HND/Cs, Hons degrees and a range of professional awards.

## 6. Why is HE in FE important?

HE in FE is:

- **Local** – it meets the needs of local employers, local employees and local young people.
- **Good value** – it is delivered by staff who have a teaching qualification, who are often still active in their profession, and who provide more contact time than would be offered on similar courses in a University setting.
- **Skills focussed** responding to the needs of employers
- **An agent for social mobility and economic advancement, with many students drawn from backgrounds with low historic rates of participation in HE**
- An important **engine for regional economies**, responding to local skills needs and those of SMEs
- **College fees are usually lower** than those charged by Universities for similar courses - currently around £2,000 per year rather than £3,225.

## 7. What about part time students?

If we include non-prescribed professional programmes, the majority of HE in FE is delivered on a part-time basis, often to people who wish to improve their career prospects while in lower-grade posts. HE in FE can provide an opportunity to gain entry to the professions by obtaining Chartered or other professional qualifications. These give a license to practice and immediately widen the career options and lifestyle choices available to the student.

## **8. What do students do afterwards?**

Most Fd graduates progress to the final year of an honours course. Anecdotal evidence suggests that HE in FE graduates have a higher rate of progression into employment than those leaving from the University sector, possibly because of the more vocational nature of their courses. Those already in employment are more able to maintain/improve their positions within their existing company or sector.

## **9. What about quality and standards?**

This is not in doubt. Recent IQER reviews (2008-09) by the QAA led to a confidence judgement in 95 % of the HE delivered in FE, with only two colleges raising concerns. A comparative judgement on the provision delivered by Universities is not available.

## **10. Why do students choose to study HE in FE?**

Students value HE in FE for:

- Local delivery
- High taught contact hours
- Good levels of tutor access and support
- Vocational relevance
- The focus on teaching

## **11. Can students progress to higher study?**

Students following Foundation degree courses have agreed progression routes on to the third year of honours courses at a local University. Alternatively, those who have obtained vocational qualifications such as NVQs can compete for places on Foundation degree or honours courses in the open market. Many will also go on to higher professional qualifications

## **12. Does it offer value for money?**

In 2009-10, less than half of all Colleges offering HE had lodged an Access Agreement with the Office for Fair Access<sup>5</sup>, suggesting that over half still charged the minimum fee of £1,285. Taken together with higher levels of contact time, good QAA judgements and the economies which come from living at home, HE in FE offers exceptionally good value to the student.

## **13. How does it serve the needs of employers, including SMEs, support jobs, business, enterprise and the economy?**

In many ways, part time students reflect the local economy, as they become the managers and entrepreneurs of the future. Colleges and employers tailor Foundation degrees to meet immediate and predicted skill needs, thereby developing a pool of skilled technicians within the locality. More importantly, the idea of up-grading skills through work-based learning becomes the norm: it becomes part of company and locality culture for employers and employees to purchase skill packages from their local college in order to maintain their skills at an optimum level. Micro-employers and SMEs, particularly in rural areas, are often wholly dependent on FE Colleges for access to higher-level skill training.

## **14. How does it fit in the wider HE landscape?**

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.offa.org.uk/press/quick-facts/>

HE in FE is only a small part of HEFCE-funded undergraduate and equivalent provision, but if LSC-funded courses are also included, this figure rises to over 10%. More important than the overall figure is the particular nature of this provision, however.

- It is specifically vocational in nature and largely work-based. It enables employers to respond to immediate skill needs and offers employees an upward route through their particular sector.
- It does not set out to be research-focused – this is the natural territory of some traditional Universities – but it does focus on the application of knowledge to current technical problems and business issues.
- It is characterised by an emphasis on teaching. Many part-time staff have both a teaching qualification and experience in a particular sector by virtue of the fact that they are still economically active in their original profession.

### **15. Why is it vital to local and national economic success?**

Traditional modes of HE delivery do not fit with a rapidly-changing technological economy and society – we need to move to a situation whereby HE skills can be developed and upgraded across a working life, enabling skilled practitioners to retain and improve their skills.

### **16. What can be done to help it grow and prosper?**

- HE in FE should feature in all national promotions for HE. This isn't the case at the moment – most campaigns only refer to the University sector without reference to the College alternative.
- More direct funding rather than the current preference to route funding through a partner University would ensure that all the money available for a particular course was directed towards the learner. At the moment, each partner University takes a percentage of the funding as an administration fee in return for a variety of services. Some of these are valued by FECs as being necessary and beneficial – many are less so. The average top-slice is about 25-30% per course.
- Directly funded Colleges are unable to offer modules of whole courses. The ability to do so would give greater flexibility to respond to employer needs, especially at a time of economic pressure when long periods of release for study may not be possible, and greater opportunities for learners to combine study with work.
- Progression can be encouraged at local level. The majority of employers are probably familiar with their local College as a result of previous work at L3 and below, and have a great deal of confidence in the staff's ability to deliver higher-level work-based or work-related qualifications. The present interpretation of the funding rules means that it is difficult for two willing partners to work together to meet a local need for higher-level skills. This also militates against an employer contribution to fees: employers will only pay for what they want.
- College consortia, led by large and experienced providers of HE in FE, could be developed as an alternative funding route but also as source of help between HE in FE providers within the FE sector.
- Direct access to sources of funding such as the HEFCE Strategic Development Fund would stimulate development within this style of HE. It would open the way for FE Colleges to design and deliver more flexible progression pathways to higher level studies (especially from apprenticeships) and, importantly, enable them to develop new qualifications that have a distinctive, vocational, employer-facing character.