

**Do FECs have a built-in structural advantage in the delivery of HE that comes from being a FEC?**

**Proposition.**

**The focus of the bulk of FEC HE provision should be at Intermediate Level 4, rather than Hons degrees. FECs are able to offer 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.**

**1. Staff Structures.**

Many FE staff are employed on flexible contracts. 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.

This varied pool of resources enables FECs to 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. Staff Backgrounds.**

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, enabling them to see the point of theoretical components in largely vocational courses. Tutors understand the structures of the QCF and can ensure that employers and employees receive the precise training that they want but in a form which also has an agreed status in terms of credit and credit accumulation and transfer

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.

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.

### 3. Approaches to learning and teaching.

From the employer perspective:

- Responsive, dynamic timetabling and access to skilled staff employed on flexible terms and conditions enables FECs to address market needs rapidly. Train to Gain illustrated how FECs are able to move staff and resources swiftly to where they are most needed. This same flexibility can be applied to HE.
- As noted above, FECs are able to make theory and practice work together, taking a learner's work-based experience and underpinning it with academic theory. Staff can also work across a wide range of academic levels. This means that they can deliver to employees at all levels within the same organisation, thus potentially meeting the entire training needs of a particular company. (This is cost-effective to both the employer and the FEC.)
- 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.
- 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. As an illustration, Newcastle College Group is responsible for delivering 23% of the Fd courses in the North East. Universities directly deliver less than 5% of the same courses.
- 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.

From the student perspective:

- 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 and managed through systems and protocols that were developed for FE learners.
- 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 the Framework for Excellence, SAR and Ofsted Inspections in all other aspects of their work. The same approach is carried through to HE provision This is further driven by individual academic targets at student, course and institutional level which are evaluated through systematic performance monitoring systems.
- HE in FE provides real life role models and progression pathways for the 14-19 cohorts of FE students from WP backgrounds on vocational programmes within the same college. This helps to raise aspiration and raise the profile and status of higher-level vocational skills in addition to higher level academic study

- 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+.
- Quality of provision is high. Rigorous quality assurance measures are in place, driven by lesson observations and action improvement plans for underperforming staff. IQER results are good, suggesting that the sector offers high quality at a competitive cost, in comparison to HE delivered in HE. QAA judged 99% of HE courses in FE colleges to be commendable or approved.
- 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.
- 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. Employers are also at the heart of the design and delivery of every college's Foundation degree programmes, completing a circle of relevant, necessary and high-quality provision that is often delivered by industry-active staff.

#### **4. Employer Engagement.**

FECs 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. As a result, all FECs are aware of the L1 – L3 needs of their communities and are able to build on this knowledge to address impending higher-skills needs.

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.

Finally, apprenticeship numbers are set to increase significantly. A key role for FECs 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.

#### **5. Giving value for money.**

Summarising many of the points made above, 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 is cheaper and offers better value for money for all concerned.

Quality standards are not sacrificed. QAA annual assessments show a high level of achievement by Colleges, reinforcing the contention that this is indeed quality at an affordable price.

## **6. Conclusions.**

The role of FECs 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 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 (i.e. response to the closure of Rover in the West Midlands and a quality response to the Train to Gain initiative).

In order to develop this established position, the following needs to happen:

- 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 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 2007 Act
- A change in the interpretation of existing legislation which would enable colleges to respond to employer needs more rapidly by offering funded modules or units of provision, as HEIs are able to do.