

# NEW CHALLENGES, NEW CHANCES



## Response of the Mixed Economy Group of colleges (MEG)

### Introduction.

This response is produced on behalf of the Mixed Economy Group of colleges (MEG). The Mixed Economy Group represents those Further Education colleges which have a significant, established, strategic and developmental role in the provision of Higher Education. Currently, 39 colleges belong to the group, all of which have a minimum of 500 HE FTE: half have more than 1,000 HE FTE. 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

Given the focus of the group, our response deals only with those areas of this consultation which impact on HE delivered in an FE setting. Whilst we have paid particular attention to section 8, which is specifically concerned with HE, we have also offered a view on other sections when we foresee a potential impact on the delivery of HE in FE. Overall, our purpose is to stress the need for a holistic approach, both to Skills and HE operational matters and to FE and H policy principles.

Our individual members will make college-wide responses which cover all of the areas of the consultation.

### Section 1. Vision for the FE landscape and shape of the sector

#### Q1. To what extent should the Government influence the range of structural models for FE and skills delivery?

The Government is right to draw attention to the links that can be made between FE colleges, universities and employers in order to facilitate vocational progression to HE. The time is also ripe to revisit *FE Colleges – Models for Success*, as much has changed in the last 3 years.

The view of the MEG membership is that an artificial distinction is currently drawn between policies for Skills and policies for HE. Until a holistic approach is adopted to policy development across both sectors, it will always be difficult to address the needs of those who wish to pursue higher-level skills, whether from the work-place or from school.

We also see a need to ensure that transition and progression between FE/HE/Skills is made more streamlined and that any artificial barriers are removed.

**Q5. We propose that the existing college merger criteria should be broadened to cover the need for effective leadership and management and the promotion of competition and diversity in the local area. Do you agree that these changes are sufficient to support the Government's ambitions? Are there any others you would propose?**

We support this proposal, but, as suggested above, it must be undertaken on a holistic basis. Currently, the requirement is for colleges which deliver HE to consult with local universities before any curricula or programme changes are introduced: the reverse requirement is not in place. This potentially disadvantages the FE sector as it is rendered blind to any similar proposals that may be being considered by nearby universities.

Competition and diversity must be balanced by consideration of the quality of provision that is/could be available. If merger can ensure better quality, it should be considered.

We support any proposals which will benefit the strategic nature of HE in an area (and the quality of that HE) but contend that this must be a requirement of both universities and colleges, and thus the subject of collaborative planning. Merger proposals should incorporate this principle.

## **Section 2. Introducing Level 3/4 loans and sharing responsibility for investing in skills**

Consultation questions on this section are published in a separate document at <http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/further-education-skills/docs/N/11-1219-new-challenges-further-education-loans>

Our only comment here is to note an unintended consequence. Adults who take out a L3 loan and who are interested in progressing on to HE as a result of their L3 experience/success, may find themselves still repaying the FE loan as they approach a decision point for HE applications. In other words, if they are still paying back one loan they may be discouraged from taking out another and thus decide to forgo the HE experience.

## **Section 5. Teaching, learning and qualifications**

**Q14. How could a commission on vocational teaching and learning best help the sector improve?**

MEG welcomes this suggestion, as our own research *Strategic Options, Operational Challenges (LSIS, 2010)* <http://www.aoc.co.uk/en/research/aoc-surveys-and-research/he-in-fe-colleges.cfm> confirms that those teaching HE in a college setting do have specific CPD needs. There is a risk of potential isolation, as HE teaching staff are a clear minority in most colleges. We have established five pilot communities of practice in order to begin to address this and would welcome involvement in further work of this nature.

We welcome the acknowledgement given in the consultation document of the "dual professional" status of HE teaching staff. This is a distinctive feature of HE in FE and one which could be built upon in order to create a cohesive programme offer which retained credibility with employers.

**Q16. What else needs to be done to stimulate and spread innovation, including embracing the potential of new learning technologies?**

Recent MEG research for JISC *Creating a Virtual Faculty (2010)* <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/elearning/meg> suggests that staff teaching HE in an FE environment are less likely to use the VLE and similar e-learning technologies than staff delivering FE in the same college. In part, this reflects the expectations of validating partner HEIs – on-line assessment, for example, is less acceptable within HE than is the case within FE – as well as overall technical competence and an ability to make the best use possible of the medium as a teaching aid.

**Q17. How do you currently assess the employability skills needed by your local employers – how could this be improved?**

Foundation degrees and Higher National Diplomas are large components of the HE in delivered in FE. Fds must involve employers in the design of the qualification and employers sit on the Programme Boards convened to monitor Fds and HNs. As such, they offer a valuable source of information for college staff and can help to ensure that programme content is current and relevant.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that HE in FE graduates are more likely to be employed soon after graduation than their university-educated peers. Those in employment at the time of graduation are more likely to remain employed and to be promoted.

Delivering employability is not the sole responsibility of colleges and universities. There is also a need for employers to take more interest in the curricula offered by local HE providers. It is easy to complain about graduate employability - but past and current research suggests that relatively few employers take a proactive role in this process. (See *European Commission: Flash Eurobarometer 304: Employers' perception of graduate employability. Analytical report 2010.*) [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/flash/fl\\_304\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/flash/fl_304_en.pdf) .

**Q18. Have you any experience of developing new qualifications to meet a new / emerging need – how did this work?**

MEG colleges work with employers and validating universities to offer Fds. Anecdotally, there is a tension between the employers' needs for higher level skills and the universities' requirement for a high level of academic content in a skills-based qualification. Methods of assessment are also a source of tension, as those who possess vocational qualifications are unlikely to have the essay-writing skills expected in traditional written assessment.

Some colleges are working with Pearson to develop the new BTEC degree. As part of this they will look at ways of addressing these conflicting expectations.

**Section 8. Delivering higher education and skills**

**Q25. What can we do to improve awareness and identity of what further education can offer?**

In terms of access to college-based HE, we offer advice to Government, HEFCE and the FE sector itself.

Government: A holistic approach to HE is needed. This must not be predicated on the outdated assumption that it is synonymous with three year full time degrees delivered to 18 year olds (who possess academic qualifications) in universities. An acknowledgement that HE in FE exists and serves a different market would be helpful. If this could be referenced in advertisements and in information about student finance, for example, it is likely that more adults will consider progression from vocational routes. Consideration should be given to the relevance of current NSS and KIS criteria. Many are not easily applied to HE in FE or may not be of interest to the students who pursue their HE in this environment.

HEFCE: As above. Older students are more likely to follow part-time courses and to live at home with their families. They are also more likely to be following a course which addresses a skills shortage or skills gap, and so are contributing to raising economic standards in their locality. Given that they are in full-time employment, relevant information needs to be readily accessible and easy to understand. This includes information about how to access student finance as well as the overall process of applying to HE. These potential students will not be able to draw on advice which is readily available to those in schools and sixth form colleges.

FE sector: Previous MEG research (*ibid*) noted that adult access to impartial careers education and guidance was variable. In some cases employed adults were able to access face-to-face CEG outside of work hours but this was not widespread. Other research *Apprentice Progression: interim report on action research. ( fdf/MEG 2010)* <http://mixedeconomygroup.co.uk> stressed the need for greater contact between Work-Based Learning staff and HE teaching staff within the same colleges.

## **Q26. What are the opportunities to promote alternative progression routes into higher education?**

Research funded by fdf and MEG (*ibid*) revealed that WBL and HE teams can work in silos within the same college. By enhancing staff CPD, building HE modules into Apprenticeship programmes and ensuring that Fds /HNs are discussed at employer programme boards it is possible to cover gaps in the knowledge of all parties.

## **Q27. What innovative delivery and business models might be explored and secured to meet the needs of learners and employers in the local community?**

MEG colleges are high-volume providers of high-quality HE. Current legislation does not permit them to franchise provision to other, nearby colleges, nor does it encourage collaborative working to meet employer needs and/or raise standards of teaching and learning.

More work-based learning and, within this, more modules of HE, are practical solutions to the needs of employers facing skills gaps and skills shortages. Proposed changes to the funding of HE go some way to addressing what is currently a major barrier to successful colleges who which to meet employer demand for modules of HE delivered by their local colleges.

## **Section 9. Deregulation and devolution**

**Q29. What more can we do to improve transparency in data collection and use?**

It is difficult for colleges delivering HE to compare the outcomes of their programmes with other colleges which also deliver HE. This is particularly the case where that provision is franchised from a partner university. Some colleges find it difficult to access data concerning the HE courses which are delivered within the college.

The requirements for Taught Degree Awarding Powers and Foundation Degree Awarding Powers are currently predicated on the assumption that the applicant institution is a university. This militates against the rapid completion of the scrutiny process by colleges which are already known, by QAA, to have high standards