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Advanced and Higher Vocational Education in Scotland: Re-contextualising the Provision of HE in FE.

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Abstract

This article explores the nature of provision of HE within the FE context and discusses the prevalent cultures of delivery. Attention is drawn to the skills and pedagogic methods prevalent within FE that could offer significant benefits to the delivery of advanced level apprenticeships and applied vocationally based higher education. Discussion turns to the re-contextualisation of the HE provision in FE and the possible economic and social benefits of widening access to skills focussed higher level training courses.

Introduction

The UK benefits from some of the most firmly established and successful further and higher education institutions in the world. The rich and vibrant history of our universities is well documented and for such a geographically insignificant land mass the density and number, (157 universities in total, UK Government, 2015), of higher education establishments offers an almost baffling array of choice to prospective students. Similarly, the further education sector is extensive in its coverage and the number of colleges offering education and training in the post compulsory market is equally impressive with over 500 government funded institutions in operation (Go Study UK, 2015). There is little shortage of places to study or demand for courses (Wolf, 2011), but increasingly financial and economic factors are having a greater influence on the choices made by prospective college and university students. With university fees set to increase still further in many English universities and students seeking alternative study methods and combinations such as full time work with part time study, the potential impacts for all providers in the post compulsory sector go beyond simply monitoring student numbers. However, these factors also impact curriculum and perhaps more profoundly, socio-economic conditions where increased debt and personal expenditure affect student choices (Callender, Scott & Temple, 2012).

The traditional delineation of curriculum and provision between colleges and universities has seen much focus and movement in the last ten years. Many colleges now offer foundation degrees, degrees and in many cases post graduate study. However, given that many colleges and universities find themselves within walking distance of one another (save the more remote but no less important areas of the UK), is there now an increasing conflict of interest in provision and competition or are enhanced partnership opportunities being explored? What are the impacts of such partnerships on the learning experience of students, quality of provision of both partner providers and the motivations and expectations of the institutions providing the courses?

This article takes a broad look at key pieces of literature and explores the experiences of both university and college partners undertaking the creation and provision of partnership HE courses delivered in an FE context and also the expanding offerings and models of undertaking university level study available to today's prospective students. The article goes onto explore the culture and working practices within the further education sector and what these may have to offer in the context of HE delivery in both FE and HE institutions.

Cultural and Practical Distinctions between Further and Higher Education

When looking at sector articulation and commonalities of curriculum and practice between higher and further education focussed institutions, areas of cross over are common. Many FE colleges deliver HNC/D, degrees or parts of undergraduate and postgraduate degree level programmes. The professional identity of the lecturers delivering the same courses but in different organisations may have a critical effect on the way the courses are delivered and assessed (Wilson, 2007). Colleges and universities traditionally fill different needs in the post compulsory education sector and society but articulation in provision and the narrowing of the divide in teaching and learning practice has shown an increased convergence in modes of operation and delivery (Gallacher, 2006). Many students will start a course in a college and finish in a university (e.g. 2+2 degrees see Gallacher, 2006). Lea and Simmons (2012) in an article discussing 'HEness' in FE offer insights into some of the perceived problems and issues of delivering an authentic HE experience situated within the context of FE. The article highlights some of the operational and cultural differences that in many ways throw up barriers to the creation of a culture within FE conducive to the delivery of higher education courses. Legislative changes, funding policy and quality assurance (Davies & Simmons, 2012) present some of the surmountable issues but greater focus and concern is focused on

the cultural differences in management strategies, performativity and commercial practices. The development of managerialist culture and influence is discussed at length in the literature (see Thompson & Wolstencroft, 2013; Laurillard, 2008; Clegg, 2008; Maxwell, 2014) with criticisms levelled at the focus on business strategy, mission and vision statements, and commercial based practice. As the performance indicator driven quality tests of compulsory education have been applied to further and higher education institutions, a contentious gradual move towards a market led model of students as customers and institutions as suppliers has emerged (Feigenbaum & Iqani, 2013; Williamson, 2011). This shift in expectations and the requirements of the colleges and universities within the post compulsory education sector has led to the initiation of changes to the *modus operandi* of many institutions, the creation of new organisations and the convergence of much practice (Griggs, 2012). Further education colleges undergoing mergers to regionalise provision and the blurring of boundaries between schools and colleges, and colleges and universities in provision and curriculum has started to significantly change the direction and scope of post compulsory education (Gallacher, 2006).

Undoubtedly the age of austerity has contributed its own pressures on all areas of education, reducing budgets, increasing student numbers, commercially generated streams of income and cyclic policy changes all having impacts on the established systems and processes of educational management (Scott, 2010). In fact, in many cases, as Gallacher (2006) highlights it is these pressures that contributed to the expansion of FE colleges into the market of delivering HE courses. Given the experiential, anecdotal and literary evidence of cultural and practical differences between FE and HE it is possible and reasonable to accept that creating 'HEness' in FE is problematic. However, is this a barrier to the successful delivery of HE in FE? What of the characteristics prevalent and common in FE colleges that could be beneficial to the delivery of some HE courses?

'FEness' in HE

FE colleges have long supported the development, training and education of work based trainees. Modern apprenticeships are well established, internationally recognised and respected as valuable requirements for industries with rich histories of indentured apprentices and modern concerns alike. Increasingly higher level technical apprenticeships are demanded with students required to achieve HNC or HND equivalents prior to deployment into their field of specialism. As Morrell, Scott, Mcneish & Webster (2011) discuss, these types of

apprenticeships are offering increased access to HE for sections of our national demographic that have traditionally had reduced representation attaining HE level qualifications. Access into FE courses at entry level with supported and structured learning can provide progression into HE where more traditional academic routes directly from school may be less suited to many candidates. Social inclusion and mobility are key beneficial factors of increasing access to HE via vocational and applied routes through colleges (Hall, Joslin & Ward, 2010). Scott (2010) highlights these issues further and draws attention to the difficulty that some students suffer in transition from HE in FE delivery to the cultural differences experienced in HE institutions. The increased use of scholarly approaches to teaching, differing concepts of knowledge and a research based culture present an often stark contrast to the active approach of pedagogic practice more akin to school methodology common within FE. Increased focus on student support (e.g. classroom teaching assistants and learning development tutors), vocational skills development and a teaching focused paradigm offer a different experience in FE to the traditional scholarly model prevalent in higher education institutions. The intention here is not to express preference for either model or to level criticism at organisations but to highlight the wider concerns of both FE and HE practitioners in relation to delivery, partnerships and progression routes. We aim to open discussion and further explore commonalities, accommodations and shared practice that could lead to the increased success of transition and articulation for students studying in FE on both further and higher education courses.

Blurring the Lines or Crossing the Boundaries?

Wilson (2007), in concluding research into professional identity of lecturers delivering HE in FE identified that although the respondents acknowledged the importance of research, they did not see it as a part of their role. However, Feather (2012) gives us further insight into this area and concludes that FE lecturers delivering HE would like to be in a position to become leading specialists in their respective areas through the conducting of research but their working environment precludes active engagement. In conjunction with the reported lack of time, a lack of recognition, by the FE sector as a whole of the importance and benefits of research based practice, are the primary factors preventing respondents from engaging with enquiry. However, Scott (2010) discusses the employer focussed, employer funded and employer led nature of much HE in FE which raises questions regarding the requirements and necessity of a research based culture for the successful delivery of high quality HE. Employers focussed on higher level skills acquisition and wider industrial awareness may

look more favourably upon HE level training in vocational and technical abilities than a more theoretical or creative research based immersion in a subject matter. This approach may utilise a greater level of support for learning, pedagogic delivery and skills training methodologies but the level of learning and requirements of the industry and employer may be more directly served. The standalone nature of the described HE in FE and the cultural barriers discussed present something of an impasse to the development of cultural characteristics of FE and HE within the counterpart's organisations and methodology.

The FE sector has a long heritage of supporting the learning of communities, industry and entrants who require tuition and support from entry level through to integration with vocational and professional groups (Köpsén, 2014). The continuous engagement with the work of widening access and the promotion of social inclusion provides a basis for the progression of FE graduates into HE courses. Higher education institutions are bound by their models and requirements for entry which are designed to maintain exacting standards, ensure the suitability of courses of study for applicants and maintain the cultural identity and practices of the institutions. This is a highly valuable practice and as Lea & Simmons (2012) point out central to the creation of the 'HEness' of HE. However, these practices do not always cater for the learning experiences and skills of FE graduates wishing to progress from HE level study in FE to full immersion in study within the HE sector.

In recent years FE has undergone much scrutiny by government commission and the production of recommendations and reports has underlined much of the desired change and drive within the sector. Professor Alison Wolf in the Review of Vocational Education (Wolf, 2011) highlighted the role and significance of higher level education delivered in FE colleges. Wolf (*ibid*) advocates the improvement and clarification of progression and articulation routes into higher level education and training for students studying in FE. Although HE in FE has been delivered since the 1950s (Davies & Simmons, 2012) the focus of much delivery has been preparing FE students to meet the requirements of HE institutions offering progression routes in degree level qualifications. The Scottish Widening Access Program (SWAP) offer an interesting example. SWAP courses, delivered in FE institutions, offer returning adult students a second chance at education providing supportive environments for study and progression into HE (SWAP, 2015; Gallacher, 2006). These programs are widely available throughout Scotland and provide valuable access to education for many people whose personal, social and economic situation may have traditionally posed challenges to accessing degree level learning opportunities. The focus of these programmes within FE is to

offer progression through the sector and into universities which has benefits for many but emphasises the perceived requirement to attend university for valid HE provision. This is indicative of the wider FE sector in Scotland, and the focus on preparing students for entry into university.

The Education Working for All report (Scottish Government, 2014) outlines several areas of interest that add to the debate regarding the nature and validity of HE delivered in FE. The report focussed on the requirement to develop and promote higher level technical vocational training to support the increased requirement for associate professional skills. This training is to be developed and delivered in partnership with employers, colleges and universities with a focus on the applied, technical and practical skills available within the vocational FE sector. The Education Working for All report (ibid) states that, with colleges accounting for one in five young higher education students, FE institutions play a vital role in delivering meaningful vocational education. With the increasing requirement for higher level technical and associate professional skills in an ever changing market and pathways provided to rewarding employment through higher level study, government agencies and FE providers need to develop new models to deliver higher level apprenticeships equivalent to degree level study.

Walker & Zhu (2007) argue that the evidence from the reviewed labour market research suggests that there is a greater economic return from and for individuals with higher level qualifications. Further developing qualifications within the FE sector to HE levels for the vocationally skilled workforce could mean a significant increase in economic return for both individuals and the local and regional market economy. Current models under development in the wider UK, such as degree apprenticeships in England that '*bring together the best of higher, professional and technical education*' (Government, 2015) could offer potential partnership opportunities between HE institutions and FE colleges, in Scotland, where the emphasis is on higher level vocational skills development assessed and delivered with a focus on FE models of training.

Conclusions

There is no doubt that there is little shortage of HE or FE provision available to students, communities and industry in the United Kingdom. As discussed, up to one in five students accessing HE do so through FE institutions (Scotland), there is however a government identified need to revise the nature and expand on the range of higher education delivered in

FE. The current models of HE in FE within the Scottish context focus on progression through FE and into HEIs and continued learning or the delivery of the highest attainable level of qualification for specific subject areas (e.g. HNC/D in Hairdressing or Automotive Maintenance and Repair). Although these models are successful in many aspects of provision and delivery they often do not allow for extended development of vocational skills.

The requirement for the development of higher level vocational skills within industry, and the needs of regional market demands increasingly prioritised by both devolved and national governments, has highlighted the need for FE colleges to devise different partnerships with HEIs in order to deliver advanced skills training.

Removing the focus on transition through FE to HE and providing advanced skills training utilising the benefits of practices already associated with FE, could offer opportunities to meet regional and economic requirements whilst re-contextualising the nature and provision of the higher education offered in FE. There are several challenges presented in the pursuit of developing HE in FE and the maintenance of partnerships and successful current practices. The intention is not to suggest a replacement for HE and HEIs but to add an additional complementary route into valid and quality driven higher education. Ensuring that a distinction is drawn between the respective focus and purpose of the alternative routes will provide clarity for employers, students and educational providers. The requirement for universities to continue in the production of high quality research, that fuels innovation and knowledge transfer is vital in the development of industry. However, of equal importance is the recognition of the requirement to focus on higher level vocational routes that allow for skilled implementation of the research outputs. Focusing on advanced vocationally based HE delivered in FE, enables the bespoke development of courses and apprenticeships that are industry led and directly address the identified skills gaps within the current workforce (Scottish Government, 2014).

Given the outlined possibilities for increased access to employment opportunities and skills development within the Scottish workforce, perhaps there is scope for greater value to be placed on the skills and methods prevalent in FE to deliver a vocationally focused HE provision that values the practices of both sectors?

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