

**Strategic Options, Operational
Challenges:
A study of Higher Education
delivered in a
Further Education setting**

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Scope of Study

- To undertake a detailed review of HE in FE in providing opportunities for the development of higher level skills
- To provide an overview of the issues and challenges facing Colleges as they develop this vital role
- To explore the key strategic questions for colleges
 - how to sustain funding stability in uncertain times
 - how to maintain and enhance the quality of what the sector offers

Who was involved

- MEG lead on the research project which was funded by LSIS, through the Innovation Fund 2009
- We contacted 80 providers of HE in FE and interviewed 66 college managers
- Working with IfL, (the Institute for Learning) we obtained the views of more than 3,000 HE in FE teaching staff
- We carried out an On-line survey of over 800 students who were pursuing their HE in FE
- We interviewed staff in Regional Development Agencies, Sector Skills Councils and Lifelong Learning Networks

Why the research was carried out

- whilst many claims are made for HE in FE, very little evidence has ever been collected across a large range of Colleges to defend or challenge some of the comments that are made
- to show how well-placed HE in FE is, in terms of meeting public policy, student and employer need
- to provide evidence of the ability of Colleges to offer skills-based provision in a responsive and cost effective way could lead to an expansion in College-based HE provision

Context of the research

- At a time when education budgets are under significant pressure, Colleges have the opportunity to show that they can provide locally accessible, good quality and cost effective higher education
- The report was completed in May 2010 immediately prior to the General Election which resulted in the present Coalition Government
- Subsequently, the extent of the public spending cuts that will be needed to rebalance the nation's finances has become clearer, with no expectation that HE budgets will be spared in this process

Outcomes of the research

The Strengths of HE in FE

- Gives access to HE to a wider pool of learners than is found in a University setting - largely drawn from the widening participation cohort
- Meets employer needs, especially specialist provision in areas not covered by the traditional HE curriculum. Colleges offer industry-standard resources in many cases, particularly where these have been developed with employers and usage is shared with them
- Quality is high – confirmed by IQER results
- First choice for many students who want to stay in their locality, enjoy being taught and have significant tutor contact time
- Vocational HE is seen as a route to employment and career advancement

Points to be addressed : employers

- Colleges perceived to focus on the needs of students, not employers
- Colleges are not always able to evidence the distinctiveness that is claimed – e.g. focus on vocational HE but sometimes fail to illustrate how and with what impact
- SSCs had variable views of Colleges
- Almost impossible to evidence College impact on local economic well-being

Points to be addressed: students

- HE students don't like being with under-16's – they want an adult setting that is different to the FE one
- Colleges often purport to offer an HE experience which is comparable to that found in a University setting but in reality this is often not the case
- PT students often have poor access to support, IAG, tutors

Points to be addressed: staff

- there is a need for more specialist CPD for HE in FE staff
- there is a particular need for scholarly activity that is linked to professional updating and which impacts positively on classroom skills
- teaching of HE requires a different approach and a different skill set
- no real link has been established between CPD given to staff and impact in the classroom
- need to ensure that staff are able to adapt their teaching skills to the style required in HE

Points to be addressed: college planning

- College HE in FE Strategic Plans were generally not well-drafted - both Government and HEFCE are likely to focus on the issue of how strategic some HE in FE really is
- Colleges still organise around their main client group, those aged 14-19. Some procedures need to be differentiated to improve data collection and to recognise the staff/student need for an HE experience
- Course viability is likely to become the deciding factor in HE provision, not local need
- General loss of funding in FE budgets coupled with potential reductions in HE funding mean that Colleges could find themselves without the staff to deliver HE
- Is HE in FE really cheaper? The assumption is that it is, but the sector has never addressed this

Points to be addressed: college data

- Pull-through from a College's FE to HE is low, or difficult to estimate
- Tracking of students is poor, particularly for part-time students
- Difficult to report on post-Fd destinations and achievements; course level data not good
- Some FE Colleges have very small volumes of HE – the research identifies that in some instances HE is only 2% of provision
- The sector must be able to evidence its successes with hard facts and figures

What next?

In the course of undertaking the research and preparing this report, a number of areas for further investigation were identified. These include:

- Developing new approaches and definitions of higher level skills
- Continuing professional development for College staff teaching HE
- Creating networks for self help and collaborative working
- Better engagement with employers in delivering higher level skills
- Better pull through from level 3 to higher level skills, especially in the context of developing routes for apprentices

For the full report visit the Sheffield University research site at

<http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/content/1/c6/10/84/06/LSIS%20HE%20in%20FE%20Strategic%20Options%20-%20Operational%20Challenges%20report%20May%202010.pdf>

Or the HEA website at

[http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/universitiesandcolleges/alldisplay?type=resources&newid=ourwork/heife/strategic options operational challenges MEG&site=york](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/universitiesandcolleges/alldisplay?type=resources&newid=ourwork/heife/strategic%20options%20operational%20challenges%20MEG&site=york)