1 Higher education in further education colleges

1.1 HE in FECs: setting the context

Introduction

The introduction to this guide draws attention to the main changes impacting on higher education and further education colleges since 2003 when the original guides were published. At the time of writing this updated guide in 2008, there has been a series of consultations, government policy initiatives, legislation and responses by HEFCE and QAA.

The immediate context for publication of the guide is HEFCE’s implementation of a requirement for FECs providing higher education to have an HE strategy setting out the rationale for this provision in a local, regional and national context. The policy agenda in 2009 continues to focus on expanding and widening participation in higher education, and in particular on skills development, the contribution of ‘higher level’ skills to society in a global economy and ‘employer engagement’. Further education colleges are well placed to address this agenda, which is explored below to set the context for Sections 2 to 10 of the guide, where particular aspects of HE provision in colleges are examined. The position in 2008-09 is addressed, and changes for this academic year and beyond are noted where known. However, at a time of such rapid change the guidance is necessarily time-limited; readers are cautioned to use the sources of information in Annex E to establish the position at the time of reading.

HE in FECs

At its simplest level, ‘higher education’ comprises awards above level 3 in the qualifications framework. The frameworks covering England, Wales and Northern Ireland (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA); Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS); Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA); QAA) have been revised since publication of the original guides in 2003 to provide an aligned framework from entry level through levels 1 to 8 (see Section 2).

English further education colleges can provide ‘prescribed’ higher education (see Annex D) with funding from HEFCE. This higher education provided in the further education sector has become known in shorthand as ‘HE in FECs’. Colleges remain responsible to the LSC for their infrastructure and operations, but accountable for their use of funding and quality of provision (via an HEI as appropriate) to HEFCE and QAA (see Sections 3 and 10). Higher education delivered in further education colleges has often been taken to be HEFCE-funded (directly or indirectly) provision. However, a significant amount of provision at level 4 and above may be funded through the LSC (which has the power, but not the obligation, to fund this work) or through student or employer fees. This ‘non-prescribed higher education’ includes a wide range of vocational and professional qualifications (see Section 2 and Annex D). Colleges are accountable to the relevant awarding bodies and the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) for the quality of this provision.
The volume of HE provision in colleges during the last decade is variously quoted as forming between 9 and 11 per cent of all higher education, based on HEFCE data (Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and Individualised Learner Record (ILR)). Most general and specialist colleges provide higher education. In 2006-07, of the 387 further education colleges funded by the LSC (262 general/tertiary colleges, 23 specialist and 102 sixth form colleges), 286 were funded directly or indirectly by HEFCE. Under the proposals of ‘Raising expectations: enabling the system to deliver’ (DCSF and DIUS, 2008), sixth form colleges – few of which provide higher education – will become a distinct legal category.

The character of the provision is diverse: in volume (from FTEs of well under 100 to several thousand), in range of qualification type (higher nationals (HNs), Fds, first and in some cases postgraduate degrees) and in subject range (comprehensive, specialist or niche provision).

Expansion and targets

The 1997 National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, the Dearing Inquiry, argued for a significant expansion of higher education, with a central role for HE in further education – a ‘special mission’ for further education colleges for (directly funded) ‘sub-degree’ provision. A range of changes have flowed from this (see Parry and Thompson, 2002, ‘Closer by degrees: the past, present and future of higher education in further education colleges’, and Parry et al, 2006, ‘Managing higher education in colleges’), but not a significant overall growth in numbers of HE in FE students.

The 2003 White Paper (‘The future of higher education’) reaffirmed a significant expansion of higher education and the ‘widening participation’ target of 50 per cent participation in HE by those aged 18-30, and looked to FE to play a role in meeting this target. The target remains – though amended to ‘towards’ 50 per cent. It has been supplemented by the long-term target (from the 2006 Leitch Review) that by 2020 at least 40 per cent of the working age population should have a qualification at level 4 or above, and that foundation degree enrolments should grow, with a target of 100,000 by 2010.

But with a demographic downturn leading to a decline in the number of young adults who may enter higher education in the future (i.e. the 18-30 year olds comprising the 50 per cent participation target), the focus has shifted to working adults who do not have level 4 or above qualifications. ‘University is Not Just for Young People: Working Adults’ Perceptions of and Orientation to Higher Education’ (Pollard et al, 2008) provided evidence used by DIUS suggesting that 4 million people are considering or willing to consider participating in higher education.

HEFCE policy for HE in FECs

HEFCE has been developing a policy on higher education in further education colleges throughout its period of responsibility for higher education in England, and this has been consolidated since 2003.

HEFCE policy is premised on the assumption that HE in FECs is distinctive:

HE in FECs is already a distinctive part of the HE system. While it is dangerous to over-generalise about a diverse system, 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.

(Paragraph 32, HEFCE 2006/48)
And:

Most HE continues to take place in HEIs, but a significant amount of HE is provided in FECs, and we expect learning in the workplace and at home to increase. Over 10 per cent of undergraduate entrants are taught in FECs, of which 65 per cent are 21 or over and 48 per cent study part time.

[The data source was HESA 2006-07 and ILR FO4 2006-07.]


See Section 1.3 for the new requirement for HE strategies.

1.2 Higher level skills policy

A developing theme in policy since 1997 has been work-related (and work-based) learning and employer engagement. This was highlighted in the 2006 Leitch Review, which promoted a demand-led skill strategy. A significant range of funding and organisational initiatives affecting the HE and FE sectors have reflected the review’s recommendations.

In 2007, two education departments were created from the DfES: the Department for Children, Schools and Families and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills. It is proposed that responsibility for funding of colleges should be split. Funding for 16-18 participation will transfer to local authorities to give them clear responsibility for all 14-19 provision, and the commissioning process will be supplemented by a Young People’s Learning Agency (YPLA). Adult (19+) funding will become the remit of a new Skills Funding Agency from 2010. (See DCSF and DIUS, 2008, ‘Raising Expectations: enabling the system to deliver’, and the ‘Raising Expectations’ consultation.)

Consolidating its 2006 employer engagement strategy, HEFCE is developing a nine-strand programme of activities to meet the priority for employer engagement. Growth in provision that responds to employers' workforce development needs is no longer supported through full-funded ASNs, but is on a co-funded basis; employers contribute a proportion of the FTE grant of 25 to 50 per cent (in cash or in kind) in addition to any fees paid by the employee or employers.

The January 2008 HEFCE grant letter from DIUS followed the Comprehensive Spending Review and covers a three-year period. The letter set out the allocations for 2008-09 and proposals for 2009-10 and 2010-11, and included a range of priorities. HEFCE’s ‘Strategic plan 2006-11’ was updated in May 2008 (a new strategic plan will be published for 2009-14), and the Chief Executive commented that it was updated in a:

... climate of considerable change. The Government’s spending review has linked increased funding with new priorities. Growth in student numbers, employer links and widening participation remain as key challenges, reflecting national social and economic priorities; at the same time, population changes could mean fewer school leavers as undergraduates in the next decade, making both older and overseas students more important to the continued health of the sector.’

(Introduction)

In March 2008, DIUS published the White Paper ‘Innovation Nation’, which signalled the importance of higher education to the nation’s economic and social success and proposed accelerating the pace of development through the opening of new HE centres (a new ‘University Challenge’) and a new strategy for higher level skills. In its strategy, ‘Higher Education at Work – High Skills: High Value’ (2008), DIUS takes high or higher level skills to be a driver of economic and social development:

High level skills – the skills associated with higher education – are good for the individuals who acquire them and good for the economy.
DIUS launched ‘A new “University Challenge”: Unlocking Britain’s Talent’ in March 2008. This set out proposals to open up opportunities for towns and cities to bid for new university campuses and higher education centres. The intention is to add another 20 new local higher education campuses by 2014 to the 17 which have been supported by capital funding and ASNs since 2003 (11 already operational and six agreed). The process will be subject to bidding and combined investment from Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), local authorities, education partners, employers and community groups. In July 2008, HEFCE launched the consultation on the proposals (‘A new “University Challenge”: consultation on proposals for new higher education centres’):

For its part, HEFCE expects the new HE centres to offer a high-quality HE experience to all learners and contribute to the Council’s strategic aims. Specifically it will look at the extent to which proposals for centres address the creation of a highly skilled workforce with relevant skills for the local business community, increase higher-level skills particularly for those with no previous experience of HE and support appropriate progression arrangements. Also, proposals will need to be supported by evidence of new, sustainable demand for studying.

Partnerships form a central plank of policy for higher education and its expansion – both numerically and in widening participation by under-represented groups. They include partnerships between colleges and HEIs, with employers, and through regional groupings and networks. The policy was supported through the initial funding of Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) and will be furthered through the new higher education centres and Centres for Higher Education Excellence in FECs (see HEFCE 2006/48). The consultation on ‘A new “University Challenge”’ continues:

Further education colleges (FECs) as well as higher education institutions (HEIs) have an important role in developing locally based HE, in providing and supporting progression routes to HE and in harnessing their expertise in working with local businesses to develop skills. As ‘A new “University Challenge”’ made clear, it is likely that most proposals for new HE centres will involve collaboration between HEIs, and between HEIs and FECs.

1.3 Embedding HE in FECs: strategy and quality assurance arrangements

FECs’ HE strategies

In November 2006, HEFCE issued a consultation on its policy for HE in FE (‘Higher education in further education colleges: Consultation on HEFCE policy’, HEFCE 2006/48). Following widespread support from higher education providers for the proposal that FECs providing higher education should have an HE strategy, a pilot of the production and appraisal of FECs’ higher education strategies was conducted in 2008. The consultation, report and documents relating to the pilot can be read at www.hefce.ac.uk under Learning & teaching/Higher education in further education colleges.

HEFCE considers that colleges with a coherent strategic approach to their HE provision could become stronger and be able to maintain or grow their provision. Also, some colleges where provision has not been thought through strategically, and which does not fit well with HEFCE priorities, would be encouraged to develop a strategy for their HE.

A college’s HE strategy should cover its directly and indirectly funded (prescribed) higher education and its non-prescribed higher education within the overall strategy for the college. The HE strategy should build on and support progression from the college’s strengths in further education. It should
demonstrate a clear rationale for the college’s provision of higher education within a local, regional and national policy context, addressing identifiable needs and adding value.

This revision of the guide has taken into account the guidance offered for the FECs’ higher education strategy pilot (see HEFCE web-site), which requires strategies to address partnerships, staff development and scholarly activity, management and resourcing, curriculum development and relationships with employers.

The process of producing and appraising FECs’ HE strategies was piloted from January to July 2008 using 30 cases; 27 colleges and three partnerships were selected from a total of 141 submissions to represent a range of providers regarding form(s) of funding, partnership arrangements, volume and range of provision and geographical distribution. The process was externally evaluated (by Gareth Parry and Anne Thompson of the University of Sheffield) and a report made to HEFCE; this will be published on the HEFCE web-site in spring 2009.

Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review

QAA is responsible for assuring the quality of prescribed HE delivered in colleges. Previously, the method differed for directly funded colleges (through direct review) and those indirectly funded (review through the HEI). However, from 2008 the new Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review method is being implemented equally for all directly and indirectly funded colleges (see Section 10).

In 2008, QAA published a report based on its reviews of directly (and consortium) funded colleges between September 2002 and July 2007. The review indicates a level of confidence in HE in FE that was less established when the original guides were published:

From 2002-07, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) conducted 310 Academic reviews in 232 colleges, which looked at programmes delivered within 20 different subjects, as defined by the HEFCE unit of review.

… Each review resulted in judgements on academic standards. The reviewers had confidence in the standards of around 94 per cent of the provision. Five per cent of reviews resulted in a judgement of no confidence and 1 per cent of reviews in a judgement of limited confidence. The proportion of confidence judgements on standards remains broadly consistent across the cycle. Judgements were also made on the quality and effectiveness of learning opportunities. The quality of learning opportunities was found to be commendable or approved in 98.3 per cent of reviews and 1 per cent of reviews resulted in a failing judgement for all or part of the provision.

(‘Learning from Academic review of higher education in further education colleges in England 2002-07’, p1)

1.4 Credit frameworks and higher education

Practice in using credit and credit frameworks in the UK’s further and higher education sectors is long-standing and well established. Many colleges use the credit framework of the National Open College Network (NOCN), including for their Access to Higher Education courses. However, there has not previously been an agreed comprehensive framework for England for provision in either sector.

The QCA, with the regulators in Wales and Northern Ireland, developed proposals for a unit and credit-based qualifications system – the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF, see QCA website) – in the context of the UK Vocational Qualifications Reform Programme (VQRP). After a two-
year programme of activity to test and trial the QCF, Ofqual published the ‘Regulatory arrangements for the Qualifications and Credit Framework’ in August 2008.

The QCF formalises a standard currency for learner achievement through a qualifications system based on units and credits. One credit represents 10 hours of learning at the nine levels (entry level to level 8), and there are three sizes of qualification: award, one to 12 credits; certificate, between 13 and 36 credits; and diploma, 37 credits and above. Vocational qualifications from the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and new vocational qualifications must be accredited to the QCF by 2010; these will comply with the regulatory framework. While the framework allows for a broad spectrum of qualifications, including those with a general and a vocational focus, certain qualifications were ‘out of scope’ at the time of its publication (August 2008); these included GCSEs and GCEs. Higher level qualifications were included, including National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) – albeit that the title need not include the term. (See Section 2 – Higher level skills.)

In higher education, the Credit Issues Development Group (CIDG) was established following the 2006 recommendations of the Burgess Group. The CIDG wrote ‘Higher education credit framework for England’, published by QAA in August 2008. The framework sets out the purposes and benefits of credit and credit frameworks, pointing out their potential roles in supporting progression into and within higher education and transfer between programmes. It sets out credit values and credit-level descriptors, along with a proposed timetable for implementation by 2009-10. However, the framework is permissive, not prescriptive, and recognises the autonomy of HEIs in England.

Like the QCF, the HE framework is based on a credit value of one credit for 10 hours of learning at the relevant level, in this case levels 4 to 8. It includes a table setting out the minimum and maximum credit values typically associated with the design of programmes leading to the main HE qualifications in England as set out in the FHEQ (see Section 2). The table also includes the credit ranges for the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) from the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA), two UK credits being equivalent to one ECTS credit. The framework includes, for reference, generic credit-level descriptors referring to levels 4 and above; these are comparable to, but not the same as, the (more detailed) descriptors of the QCF at levels 4 to 8.

Extract from: supporting higher education in further education colleges. Policy, practice and prospects. HEFCE 2009/05