

Research Briefing N° 87

Understanding higher education in further education colleges

This study sought to understand the nature of higher education provision delivered in further education colleges in England and to describe and analyse the current pattern of provision, participation and collaboration.

Key words: higher education in further education colleges; HE in FE; college-based higher education; widening participation



Key findings

These findings will be of interest to those involved in delivering higher education courses in further education colleges and policy makers concerned with diversifying higher education undergraduate provision and widening participation.

- In 2009-10, around one in twelve higher education (HE) students (8% of all undergraduates) were taught in further education colleges (FECs) and 60% of them studied part-time.
- The HE courses FECs offer are frequently more varied than those provided in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and often more flexible and responsive to the needs of local students and employers, with a distinctive 'learning culture'.
- FECs make an important contribution to widening HE participation, especially for less mobile students with limited HE choices.
- FEC managers considered their HE provision as complementary to provision in HEIs and their relationship with their partner HEIs were seen as generally good.
- FECs are likely to make a significant, but perhaps not spectacular, contribution to future student growth. Most FECs expect only modest growth, although a few colleges which already have a significant stake in HE have more ambitious plans.
- It is less clear that FECs are able to offer substantially more flexible provision than HEIs because colleges are subject to significant external constraints imposed not just by validating HEIs but also professional bodies and employers accrediting agencies.
- Colleges are able to offer more cost-effective delivery than HEIs – but perhaps less decisively so than is sometimes claimed.
- FECs already make an important contribution to the diversity of HE in England – and that contribution is likely to increase.

What we did

The research was commissioned by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and undertaken by the Institute of Education, between March 2011 and March 2012, jointly with the University of Sheffield. The research focused on case studies in 25 FEC in England and included talking to senior managers in these FECs and surveying students taking HE qualifications at these FECs.

BIS wanted the research to:

- identify the features of successful HE in FE provision, including their accessibility, flexibility, responsiveness and cost-effectiveness;
- consider where the opportunities for expansion might best be found, whether through the growth of current successful provision or by the stimulation of new activity; and
- encourage participation by those groups targeted by government policies for widening participation.

How we did it

The research consisted of the following:

- a review of recent relevant literature;
- a statistical analysis of administrative data on HE students and courses taught in FECs;
- interviews with senior managers in FECs offering courses of higher education in 25 FECs and their partner HEIs;
- a questionnaire survey of 2,523 HE students taught in FECs;
- 25 in-class discussion groups of HE students in FECs; and
- interviews with employers involved with HE in FECs.

Further information

For the full report see: [Understanding Higher Education in Further Education Colleges \(June 2012\). BIS Research Paper 69](#)

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