

Policy discourses about HE in FE posit distinct advantages of FECs over HEIs, in relation to: accessibility; vocational and flexible provision; learning 'ethos' and environment; costs; and widening participation (HEFCE 2006, QAA, 2006, BIS, 2011). Concurrently, broader debates about HE have focused on student choice, as encapsulated in the 2011 HE White Paper *Students at the heart of the system*' (BIS 2011), which suggest that students make informed and rational choices about where and what to study. So within the context of students choosing to study at a FEC rather than a university, it might be expected that students would opt for colleges because they are more accessible, provide vocational and more flexible courses that meet their needs and those of employers, offer a more intimate and supportive learning culture, are cheaper, and attract students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

These policy discourses frame the findings of a national survey of HE in FE students – the focus of this paper – which examined student HE decision making and choices, particularly why they studied at a college rather than a university, and their experiences of, attitudes towards, studying at a college.

The study included a survey of 2,523 undergraduates drawn from 25 English FECs and 21 in-class discussion groups. The students were given a self-completion paper questionnaire which was distributed and collected in class in autumn 2011.

Students' motives for entering HE were primarily instrumental: they wanted to improve their life chances and job prospects. These employment and career-related reasons, alongside interest in their course, were also why they selected their course. Students' reasons for choosing their college were more pragmatic: the college offered the courses they wanted and was close to their home or workplace. This convenience factor was a recurring theme in the study suggesting that accessibility and localness were an attraction.

Students' reasons for studying at a college rather than a university were much more varied, so numerous factors influenced them. Most often, students opted for a college because they believed their type of course was only available at a college, indicating that for a minority, colleges were fulfilling a niche role in their provision.

However, were students making an informed choice of institution? Most had no, or limited, experience of universities. They were largely unaware of, or did not understand, the differences between colleges and universities, or the opportunities universities could offer. For others who appreciated these differences, sometimes there was confusion. Specifically, 17% of students studying for a Bachelor's Degree thought they had applied to study at a university not a college. These students were not making an informed or active choice to study at a college, quite the opposite; they thought they were choosing to study at a university.

Overall, students were not particularly drawn to colleges because of their distinctive missions, especially in terms of employer engagement activities and their vocational courses—prized features of college as against university HE provision. In addition, students were not especially attracted to colleges because they offered a range of advantages over universities. For example, students did not perceive colleges as giving them either a labour market advantage compared with university graduates, or a better learning and student experience than universities.

If students were making informed decisions, we might expect this to be reflected in whether their college course was their 1<sup>st</sup> choice, and whether they applied to study only at their college or elsewhere. Two-thirds of students only applied to study at their college, and often their choices were limited and highly constrained, even when their college was their first choice. Students who selected their college because it was near their home or workplace, or because they had progressed from another course at their college or had previously studied at the college, were far less likely to apply elsewhere to study – they were opting for localness, convenience, and academic ‘safety’. While some were making a positive informed choice to study at their college, others were restricting their options and choices, consciously or unconsciously because of their family, material, cultural and social circumstances. It is questionable, therefore, if all these students were making informed choices.

Other students had broader horizons and felt less constrained – 29% had applied to study at a university, especially younger white students from families with HE experience. For some, their decision to study at a college was a positive one as they genuinely had a choice between a college and a university, but others had failed to obtain the university’s entry requirements, and so had no choice but to attend a college if they wanted a higher education.

College students’ overall educational experience was positive, just like those reported in other studies on those studying at universities (Purcell *et al* 2009). However, their assessment of the college environment and their individual daily experiences of being a student were more mixed, than and not as favourable as their university peers. On the one hand, college students did not have access to the breadth of experiences available in universities – in terms of both the range of learning resources, and extra-curricular activities. On the other hand, college students had a more personal learning environment than their university colleagues.

The experiences of the part-time college students were not as good as those of their full-time peers, or those of part-time university students (Callender *et al* 2010), especially regarding personal support and feedback. This brings into question, the responsiveness of colleges to students’ desire for flexible study – a feature colleges pride themselves on as part of their broader agenda of providing flexible HE vocational provision, and an acclaimed distinctive feature of FE provision.

Returning to the policy discourses informing the development of HE in FE and student choice. The report card is mixed. FECs were more accessible and local than universities and provided flexibility although part-time students struggled to combine PT study with full-time employment. But, FECs were not necessarily perceived by students as offering advantageous links to local employers or the labour market, and FECs' learning ethos was attractive to students but students missed out on the breadth of a university experience. Above all, it is questionable if students were making informed choices between a college and a university higher education.

## References

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