

FECs make an important contribution to the delivery of HE in England (and an even more important contribution in Scotland). There are currently as many students taking HE courses in FECs as there were in the entire HE system at the time of the Robbins report which triggered the major post-war expansion of HE in the United Kingdom (Scott 2009). That contribution is focused on part-time students taking sub-Bachelors courses (largely Foundation Degrees and Higher Nationals), although some colleges offer undergraduate and even postgraduate courses. It is also claimed that FECs are able to provide more accessible, cost-effective and employer-focused education than higher education institutions (HEIs). However, the number of students taking higher education courses in FECs has remained static over the past 15 years, and the bulk of this provision complements rather than competes with courses in HEIs. To gain a better understanding of HE-in-FE the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) commissioned an in-depth study. The (proposed) symposium is based on the findings of that study (Parry *et al*, 2012).

The first topic will be to place HE-in-FE in context. It is a minority activity in the majority of FECs, with the exception of a small number of so-called 'mixed economy' (i.e. FE and HE) colleges and of a few large-scale providers of HE. So their HE provision needs to be considered in the wider context of their overall mission. FECs have three major roles. First, they are major providers of the later stages of secondary education (predominantly but not exclusively of vocational courses; colleges are also major providers of A-levels). Secondly, they are major contributors to meeting the needs of the skills agenda, by providing traditional technical and professional programmes, employer-based courses and continuing professional development. Finally, they also offer advanced courses, that include conventional higher education programmes (typically at sub-Bachelors level, in particular Foundation Degrees) but also a wide array of so-called 'non-prescribed' courses (predominantly leading to professional or industry-certified qualifications).

Although the focus of our research was on the third role – higher education in further education, all three roles – and, in particular, their dynamic relationship – need to be considered if future prospects for the development of HE-in-FE are to be properly evaluated. All three are likely to change. The role of FECs in (non-vocational) upper secondary education could be restricted as a result of the Coalition Government's drive to encourage the growth of Academies and 'Free Schools'; there is likely to be resurgence of school sixth-forms. The role of colleges in more traditional forms of technical education is also likely to change if the intense focus on the skills agenda under the previous Labour Government is relaxed. The role of FECs as providers of advanced education is also likely to be modified (and potentially increased), whether as part of a more deliberate segmentation of roles and missions within higher education or as part of a wider trend towards encouraging alternative providers to existing higher education institutions (HEIs) within an emerging 'market' environment.

The second will be to consider the impact of the current reform of HE in England on prospects for HE-in-FE. The overall shape, and direction, of this reform still remain unclear despite the publication of two major policy documents, the Browne report and the White Paper (Independent Review of Student Fees and Funding 2010, BIS 2011). In particular the extent to which FECs are to be granted an expanded and enhanced role is currently unresolved. Although the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has reserved 20,000 student places for low-fee providers (those charging, on average, less than £7.5K) under the so-called 'core plus margin' policy, these places are available for all institutions whether FECs or HEIs. Initially a significant number of these reserved places were allocated to FECs. But preliminary evidence of recruitment for 2012 entry suggests that a substantial number will go unfilled. In any case the number of reserved places in 2013 has been cut to 5,000. The White Paper's aim to encourage more providers to enter the HE market appears to have drafted, and the Government's more recent decision to lower the threshold for institutions' eligibility for university status (to 1,000 students) taken with private providers rather than FECs in mind. Consequently there appears at present to be a comparatively weak policy drive towards expanding the role of the latter in the provision of HE.

The third topic will be to discuss HE-in-FE in a wider conceptual and comparative context. A major strand in the historical development of English HE has been the successive incorporation of institutions in the FE sector – for example, the colleges of advanced technology first established following the 1956 White Paper and 'upgraded' into universities after the Robbins report, and the polytechnics designated in the late 1960s and early 1970s and similarly 'upgraded' in 1991-92. This is one form that the future development of HE-in-FE could take, in particular with regard to the 'mixed economy' colleges and other large-scale providers. An alternative path of development could be to a clearer division-of-labour between FECs and HEIs such as exists in Scotland, where nearly all sub-Bachelors provision is in colleges. A third path is the development of a comprehensive post-secondary education system embracing both FE and HE, such as evolved in the United States where community colleges provide not only technical and vocational programmes but also (almost all) entry-level initial higher education.

References

Browne Report (2010) *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education in England*, An Independent Review of Higher Education and Student Finance in England, <http://hereview.independent.gov.uk/hereview/report/>

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2011) *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System*, London: Stationery Office.

Parry, G., Callender, C., Scott, P. and Temple, P. (2012) *Understanding higher education in further education institutions*. London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

Scott, P. (2009) 'On the Margins or Moving into the Mainstream? Higher Education in Further Education in England'. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 63 (4), pp. 402-418.