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Sitting in the gaps? Exploring the impact of student number controls on college-based higher education in England (0216)

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Context

A significant minority of higher education students complete their undergraduate degree studies in colleges of further education. This paper explores the impact of recent reforms, including variable tuition fees, enhanced student choice and student number controls, on college-based higher education (CBHE). These reforms, designed primarily as market mechanisms to increase 'dynamism' within the sector and to further the differentiation of English higher education institutions (BIS, 2011), have to date had particular and variable impacts on college-based higher education. While all English HEIs are now operating in a more unstable context, the reforms are producing an additional range of vulnerabilities and opportunities for CBHE. These arise as a result of direct funding from HEFCE, plans to increase the number of exempted qualifications from student number controls, and proposals to open the field to new publicly-funded providers of HE in 2015/16. Crucially, all of these changes take place against ongoing tight fiscal control and a desire to keep overall numbers in a steady state, so that movement of student numbers will be *within* the system and between institutions, rather than from any growth in the system.

The paper draws on findings from the research project *Evaluating the impact of number controls, choice and competition: An analysis of the student profile and the student learning environment in the new higher education landscape* funded by a Higher Education Academy grant. The primary aim of the research is to obtain empirical data via survey and interview to ascertain the extent, nature and type of impact student number controls and other recent changes are having on both the student profile and the student learning environment within higher education institutions. This paper is based on qualitative data from senior CBHE institutional leaders, and includes a specialist agricultural college with a significant HE portfolio, a number of large colleges in major cities, and a sixth form college with very limited HE provision.

Key research questions include:

- ◆ The effects of implementation of student number controls at the institutional level;
- ◆ The impact of SNC and other market mechanisms on their relationships with partners;
- ◆ How changes are impacting on the student profile
- ◆ Financial support for students and its influence on access and progression;
- ◆ The impact of SNC on an institution's HE portfolio in terms of course, mode, contact time and study support.

Findings

Initial findings indicate that the impact of the reforms vary for each CBHE provider depending on locality, HEI partnerships and course portfolio. Other factors which have emerged as significant include: longevity of HE provision in their particular college; position of HE provision in relation to college infrastructure; dedicated spaces to develop and

consolidate the HE 'identity' of students; the HE student experience; and student support, advice and guidance for HE students. These factors cross-cut with what one college referred to as the 'collapse' of its part-time student base, with employer relations, and with students' attitudes to debt. The evidence provides an insight into the increasingly complex picture of CBHE provision and the rapidity and flexibility demanded of CBHE providers in response to the intensification of market mechanisms. The paper will synthesise the findings in relation to the themes of competition, collaboration, student profile, and the HE-ness (Lea and Simmons, 2012) of the experience offered in CBHE.

#### Relation to previous research

Terminological confusion over HE in FE has been a persistent feature of the field; 'HE in FE' has been used alongside 'mixed economy group' and dual-sector organisations (Bathmaker *et al.*, 2008) to designate this provision by mode or institutional type. The term college-based higher education (CBHE) is preferred in this paper as it maintains differentiation by institution but includes by level and variety of provision (HEA, 2013). As such, it gestures to the dissolution, at the policy level at least, of earlier boundaries between Further Education Colleges and HEIs as a result of direct funding of HE in FE by HEFCE (BIS, 2011).

Historically, Further Education Colleges have provided higher education in a variety of forms since the 1950s (Parry and Thompson, 2002). More recently, despite playing an important role in providing HE places for an expanding pool of students and in meeting political priorities around widening participation (the Dearing Report, NCIHE, 1997; Kennedy, 1997), FE in HE remained separate from HEI provision with regard to funding and administrative regimes, quality assurance arrangements, and perceptions of the HE student experience (Lea and Simmons, 2012). The White Paper, *Students at the Heart of the System* (BIS 2011) has been key in the coalition government's plans to reconfigure CBHE in relation to promoting diversity of provision, improving 'responsiveness' to student choice, and recognising excellence in teaching as well as research. This is twinned with the expectation that colleges can/ will provide 'good quality' HE at a considerably lower cost than HEIs, and that QAA review procedures will be aligned across the sector. In this changing higher education landscape, the introduction of a student number control regime, combined with increased student fees, and now SNC flexibility margins (-5%, +3%), aimed to create market mechanisms in which quality and price are combined in two ways. First, by a 'high grades' policy in which ABB grades are removed from the total number of funded places at an institution, resulting in the allocation of 85,000 places to institutions with a track record of prior recruitment of AABs; and second, by removing 20,000 places reserved for further education colleges (FECs) and new entrant providers willing to offer HE at £6,000 per year of study (HEFCE, 2013). The combined effect of these changes has been to reduce by a third the total places available in 2013/14, severely limiting SNC allocations. All of this positions CBHE as a key feature of this changing, increasingly deregulated, HE landscape. Findings from the study provide some early indications of how some providers are responding and their responses makes interesting reading in relation to what Clark (2012) sees as the 'innovation and diversity' necessary for UK higher education to compete regionally, nationally and globally.

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