

## **Implementing marketised Higher Education: The view from the street level.**

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The term 'partnership' has a number of connotations, which conjure meaning depending on the contextual setting. Within English Higher Education (H.E), partnership arrangements exist to enable the franchising of university awards by predominantly Further Education Colleges (FECs), and increasingly, private providers of education. Amidst an increasingly marketised environment (Brown, 2011), established contextual frameworks on which many of these long standing partnership arrangements are based, are challenged. The research in this paper gives an overview of the F/HE partnership context as new dynamics emerge through iterative policy implementation.

The Dearing Report (1997) identified a 'special mission' for colleges within the HE sector. Although colleges have undoubtedly become more prominent as providers of vocational and also community focussed HE, the position of college HE has remained on the margins of the HE sector (Parry, 2009; Scott, 2009). The 2003 White Paper (Department for Education and Skills, 2003) sounded a cautious approach on the role of colleges in relation to the development of the Foundation Degree, a vocationally orientated short cycle qualification on a par with the US and Australian Associate Degree's:

Foundation degrees *will often* be delivered in Further Education colleges.

We will establish 'Foundation Degree Forward', a network of *Universities* which are *leading the development* of foundation degrees... (Department for Education and Skills, 2003) (My italics)

Universities were clearly placed in the driving seat with a focus on partnerships with FECs as the mechanism for policy delivery. In the subsequent period of growth and in HE, the colleges were to become the major providers of Foundation Degrees (FD), enabled by partnership and consortium arrangements with universities.

Much research into college HE provides a macro perspective of policy (Parry, 2013; Scott, 2009), whilst there have also been valuable studies of college HE staff and the college environment at the micro level (Feather, 2012; Gale, Turner & McKenzie, 2011).

Partnerships exist at the meso level, where the nexus of policy and local implementation intersect. The purpose of this research was to provide an empirical evidence base on which

to construct a perspective of partnership as a mechanism of policy delivery, and to provide an analysis from the bottom-up tradition of policy implementation.

In the preface to the thirtieth anniversary edition of *Street Level Bureaucrats*, Lipsky (2010) summarises his central argument:

I argue that the decisions of street level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures, effectively become the public policies they carry out. I maintain that public policy is not best understood as made in legislatures or top floor suites of high ranking administrators.

Challenging top-down normative conceptualisations of policy implementation, bottom-up perspectives on decision-making and implementation focus on policy-action relationships and the actors and agencies involved (Hill, 2013). The concept of the policy/action practitioner is a feature of Policy Network Analysis (PNA) where decisions made reflect the characteristics of the actors involved (Fawcett & Daugbjerg, 2012). This perspective is supported through the use of interpretivist methodology to analyse decisions and policy making from the bottom-up (Bevir & Richards, 2009).

Using three comparative case studies of F/HE partnerships this research used mixed methods to examine the operation of partnership through interviews, focus groups and questionnaires with university partnership managers, college HE staff and students. An integrated methodological design (Plowright, 2011) was devised to operationalise a framework of inquiry into public sector partnerships (McQuaid, 2000). Data's from staff were initially analysed using open coding and subsequently themes relating to power, identity and agency. A similar approach was used with student questionnaire data (n=316) followed by a focus group to explore themes emerging from the data. Documentary evidence from each partnership provided a contextual, historic backdrop enabling comparative analysis between partnerships.

Questions were asked to test student conceptions and understanding of the relationship they had with their awarding body, (the university). Whilst 92% of students indicated that it was important that their qualification was awarded by a university, most were unsure of the role of the university and its relationship with the college. Focus group discussions on decisions on studying at college and the qualification gained through this route indicated the conception of *difference* being related to the location of study and the route that this

location afforded, whilst still being part of a university offer. Whilst most students indicated that they did not feel like a university student, the mitigating factors that were expressed as contributing to a positive HE identity were staff, and environments which excluded FE students.

Data from college staff focused on the changing partnership engagement, conceptions of HE as a competitive market, student experience and identity and the status of HE within the college. The positive aspects of partnership were expressed through references to strong and supportive relationships and resources, which were seen as under threat due to financial and structural changes in partnership arrangements. Partnership managers also identified the changing partnership environment in terms of more overt competition between institutions and a move away from regional networks/consortia, to individually negotiated agreements. Partnership managers gave examples of negotiations where balancing university and colleges interests was subject to primarily commercial imperatives. Despite exhibiting passionate defences of the social and regional benefits of partnership activity there was a perceptible appreciation that partnership had to represent mutually beneficial commercial activity.

The implementation of college HE through partnership is increasingly defined through marketised discourse rather than social inclusion. At the management level a more distinct version of transactional partnership is emerging as both university and college negotiate the boundaries between competition and collaboration. The social imperative for high quality HE that benefits from the collaboration between local colleges and university is challenged by the marketisation of HE. Assumptions of choice enhanced by the market are not relevant to a large proportion of students who are without choices due to personal circumstances and geography. The work of the street-level practitioners in developing and maintaining a sense of HE identity and academic collaboration is a pivotal and undervalued facet of policy implementation within collaborative partnerships.

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