

Scholarship and research activity in a stratified HE system: what are the rules of the game for HE in FE lecturers in England?

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Higher Education in Further Education is now a well-established part of the HE landscape in England, forming one part of a highly stratified system of higher education provision. Research and scholarly activity amongst HE in FE lecturers has become an increasing focus of attention. On the one hand, it forms part of the quality assurance requirements for HE providers. On the other, in a context of competition, marketization, and league tables of providers, research and scholarly activity have become key ways of differentiating between institutions. This paper considers these issues from two perspectives. Firstly, it examines debates about research and scholarly activity in the context of HE in FE, but also locating these debates in a wider context of definitions of what constitutes and what counts as research and scholarly activity in the wider higher education field. Secondly, it explores the implications of these debates for HE in FE lecturers, and considers the affordances but also the constraints that they face under current conditions.

Recent documents produced by the Mixed Economy Group (MEG) of colleges in England provide the initial stimulus for the paper. In 2013 and 2014 MEG produced a series of documents which explore scholarship and scholarly activity in college-based HE (MEG 2013a; 2013b; 2014). These reports provide a comprehensive overview of current practices, the policy context, the range of organisations that have a role to play in this area, and the broad-ranging understandings of different colleges about scholarly activity, from the perspective of a key and influential group in this part of the field. The reports also indicate very clearly a range of challenges to scholarly activity, including the pressure for this activity to be visible in its impact on teaching and learning. They point towards particular understandings of research and scholarly activity, which have more to say about improving practice, and rather less to say about how research and scholarship help to develop a critical view and enable people to engage in critical conversations – about practice, knowledge, ideas and so on.

The paper considers how these documents offer a particular way of understanding the rules of the game (Bourdieu, 1990) for scholarly activity in the context of HE in FE. There are gaps in this view of scholarly activity, particularly in relation to an understanding of research and scholarly activity as involving the opportunity to step back and develop a *critical view* - on practice, on existing research, on how business and industry work, on knowledge in its diverse forms. Research and scholarship in this second view are about challenging taken-for-granted assumptions about 'how things are' and 'how we do things round here'. Here scholarly activity moves beyond for example industry updating, to critically engaging with that updating - which might include thinking through why and how things have changed, why a particular innovation is appropriate (or not) in a particular context, and in whose interests. The paper argues that the different constructions and interpretations of research and scholarly activity in the HE in FE part of the wider HE field, not only form part of the positioning of different institutions and individuals within the wider field of HE, but they also shape how 'higherness' is understood and enacted (Lea and Simmons, 2012).

Bourdieu, P. (1990) *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford: Stanford California Press.

Lea, J. and Simmons, J., (2012) Higher education in further education: capturing and promoting HE-ness, *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 17 (2) 179–193.

Mixed Economy Group (2013a) Scholarly activity delivered within Higher Education delivered in Further Education Colleges. Part 1: Context and Issues.

Mixed Economy Group (2013b) Exploring scholarship and scholarly activity in college-based HE. Part 2: the survey report.

Mixed Economy Group (2014) Exploring scholarship and scholarly activity in college-based HE. Part 3: a practice guide to scholarly activity in college-based HE. What works?