Difference, diversity and distinctiveness

Higher education in the learning and skills sector

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research report
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Introduction

What, if anything, is different or distinctive about the higher education offered in the learning and skills sector? In one sense, this is a straightforward question; a matter of statistical description and simple comparison. In another, it is a journey into hazardous territory: not just in respect of evidence gaps and untidy boundaries; and not least because of disagreements, hesitations and uncertainties about the role of colleges in the English system of mass higher education.

In this report we consider some of the main characteristics of the higher education programmes and higher level qualifications provided by further education establishments. In so doing, we make broad comparisons with courses in higher education institutions (HEIs); and we examine the claims made for the distinguishing features of higher education in the post-16 sector. Our sources of evidence include national statistics and the findings of small-scale exploratory studies conducted with staff and students in further education colleges (FECs) and HEIs.

A shorter version of this report was published by LSDA under the title Dimensions of difference: higher education in the learning and skills sector (Parry et al. 2003).

Why ask?

Questions about difference and distinctiveness have been triggered by the re-discovery of FE colleges as settings for higher education. Following efforts over several decades to concentrate HE provision in ‘major’ institutions, and with the polytechnics and universities leading the expansion in recent decades, the colleges are now intended to play an important part in delivering future growth. Indeed, having achieved the shift to mass higher education without needing colleges to divert their missions, there is an expectation that these institutions will evolve new configurations and identities in the drive to near-universal higher education (Parry and Thompson 2002).

In according FE colleges ‘a special mission’ in the future expansion of sub-degree education, the Dearing inquiry into higher education launched its own version of what was essential and useful about higher education in the further education sector (NCIHE 1997). Not only were colleges well placed to meet local requirements for short-cycle higher education, especially for students regarded as ‘non-traditional’, but they would support lifelong learning. The committee expected demand to increase at the sub-degree levels over the next 20 years and, to meet this growth, it was proposed that colleges be funded directly for this purpose.

For Dearing, then, what should be special about higher education in the colleges was an exclusive focus on sub-degree provision. There was no case for expanding first-degree or postgraduate-level work in these establishments. This ‘extra discipline’ would offer each sector ‘distinctive opportunities’ and best meet growing individual, local and national needs.

Although accepted by the government, these recommendations fell victim to weak demand for sub-degree higher education and some early subject assessment reports that expressed concern about low ratings in some colleges. Also, colleges did not engage collectively or actively with the Dearing proposals and the response within the higher education sector reflected a mixture of ambivalence, unease and hostility.

Such were the circumstances in which questions were raised, and continue to be asked, about whether and how arguments for difference might be advanced or evidenced. On the one hand, colleges are concerned that the quality and standards of their programmes and awards bear comparison with those in HEIs. On the other, competition with HEIs (and other FECs) for students and resources has required that colleges highlight what is specific or special about their courses, and what additional value might be offered to students, employers and the state. More awkwardly, where colleges are in receipt of both direct and indirect funding for their higher education such claims must to do service in a variety of directions.
Put another way, the incorporation of FE colleges into the national policy framework of higher education has not provided colleges with a discrete or protected mission to distinguish their programmes, by title or level, from those in HEIs. Located outside the higher education sector and with only a minority of its provision at the higher levels, colleges are the responsibility of another sector whose policies and structures reflect another set of imperatives. As a result of these dual arrangements, colleges with higher education courses have been treated in ways that are both similar and different to HEIs; and, for these reasons, they might be expected to view their higher education courses in mixed and mediated ways.

Seven years after the Dearing inquiry, a new context has been signalled for claims to difference and distinctiveness. The publication in 2003 of the White Paper on higher education confirmed an important role for FECs in future expansion but, unlike the directly funded mission envisaged by Dearing, it proposed a more dependent role for colleges (DfES 2003). The focus of future growth was to be a new, two-year work-focused qualification – the foundation degree – awarded by HEIs and delivered largely (though not exclusively) by FECs. To secure the quality of the new degree, colleges were to be funded indirectly to deliver this provision. In the years ahead, ‘structured partnerships’ based on franchise or consortia arrangements between HEIs and FECs were expected to be the main vehicle for colleges to develop their higher education.

While there might be exceptions, indirectly funded partnerships and an increasing involvement with foundation degrees were likely to influence the way colleges and others conceived of their stake in higher education. Under present conditions, no clear set of claims or arguments has emerged to define the college contribution. In this study, we examine some of the dimensions of difference and similarity that might feature in an inventory and assessment of such claims. Before outlining our methods and findings, we review briefly the manner in which higher education in FECs has been presented in a selection of earlier reports and literatures.

A new question?

Up to the 1980s, the polytechnics, the colleges of higher education, and the colleges of further education were parts of a single further education system controlled by the local education authorities (LEAs). Unlike the 29 polytechnics and the 70 or more institutes of higher education, the ‘advanced’ or higher education courses offered at the colleges of further education were a minority of their provision; and some colleges had no advanced work at all. While efforts had been made to concentrate advanced provision in the larger and strongest institutions – the polytechnics in particular – there were no clear demarcations and designations applied to other local authority establishments.

For most administrative purposes, the key distinction was between advanced and non-advanced further education: a categorisation by level of course, not by type of institution. Except perhaps where courses and institutions were threatened with closure, transfer or merger, there was a limited imperative for colleges to distinguish their own higher education from that in other parts of the local authority system. This did not mean that their higher education was the same in its scope and character.

Rather, in a locally administered system geared to a ‘seamless’ pattern of advanced and non-advanced further education, there was less reason for colleges, as a group of institutions, to define or defend a distinctive contribution to higher education (Parry 2003).

During the 1980s, first with the establishment of a national advisory body for local authority higher education, and then with the removal of the polytechnics and higher education colleges from the local authorities, we see the formation of separate sectors for establishments of higher education and for institutions of further education. Following the Education Reform Act of 1988, the further education colleges remained with the LEAs, although some of their higher education courses were supported by the new funding body for the incorporated polytechnics and higher education colleges. This division of higher education and further education institutions was reinforced again by the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act which created a unified sector of higher education on
the one side and a new sector of incorporated further education colleges on the other, each with their separate funding and quality arrangements.

With the separation of sectors we see the beginning of a new, if somewhat muted, discourse around the nature of higher education in further education. Whereas provision in colleges was previously reported alongside the rest of local authority higher education (DES 1985), one effect of sector reform was to draw more attention to the features of courses that remained the responsibility of local government. Although regarded by government as a ‘residual’ part of higher education, a report by Her Majesty’s Inspectors (HMI) noted the ‘substantial and diverse’ character of this provision.

The LEA colleges provide courses at levels and in modes of attendance which are relatively uncommon in PCFC [Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council] sector institutions and in universities. They increase the variety and the geographical spread of higher education in England and in these ways play an important part in widening opportunities for students. DES 1989, page 17

The other major context for reviewing the college contribution was the rapid and spectacular expansion of English higher education from the late 1980s. As a result of this growth, the participation rate in full-time undergraduate education more than doubled and overall numbers increased by nearly one half in the period up to 1994 when the government called a halt to growth. Although higher education in the colleges was the part of the system that expanded most slowly, their franchise and collaborative links with the polytechnics were another means by which their contribution was acknowledged.

The forms of collaboration are diverse but the common features are, firstly, that students spend at least part of their course of study in a further education college and, secondly, that the polytechnic has academic oversight of the course. Collaboration of this sort is not new but many more institutions are becoming involved in a wider range of courses. DES 1991, page 1

The creation in 1992 of new funding and quality arrangements in each sector, together with growing pressure on university and college resources, prompted a review of the ‘interface’ between higher and further education. Although higher education in FECs was ‘multi-dimensional’ and differed greatly between individual providers, a study group led by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) pointed to a number of ‘distinctive’ features held in common.

- A tradition of closeness to the world of work
  Colleges accounted for a significant proportion of all sub-degree vocational higher education and most HE students were undertaking courses in the areas of business and management, engineering and technology.

- A local and access orientation
  The number and location of colleges made them well placed to serve ‘geographically dispersed and educationally marginalised populations’ and they played an important role in widening access to higher education, especially for part-time and mature students and those from ‘non-traditional groups’.

- A basis for progression
  Colleges allowed a smooth transition from further education to higher level work where ‘a degree of continuity is maintained for the student in terms of location, ethos and approach to teaching and learning’.

- A place for specialism
  In a number of cases colleges provided sometimes unique and specialist HE provision, often in relation to particular local and employer needs (HEFCE 1995).

Given the congruence between the distinctive features of higher education in further education and the current trends in the evolution of higher education more generally, the study group found strong grounds to suggest that FECs were well placed to respond to future demands. This conclusion, and the issues and proposals outlined in a subsequent consultation report (HEFCE 1996), were to be taken up by the Dearing inquiry and offered back to the funding councils as official government policy on how higher education in the colleges was to develop into the new century.
Scope and method

In what follows, we consider some quantitative and qualitative dimensions of difference or similarity in the nature of higher education in the learning and skills sector. There is no attempt here to be comprehensive or exhaustive in our treatment. This is a preliminary attempt to sketch some contours and assemble some claims.

In the first main section of this report, we combine statistical data from several sources to construct a comprehensive picture of the pattern of higher education provision and participation in colleges in England in 2000/01. We use these statistical sources to describe patterns between sectors as well as patterns between and within individual FECs.

The year 2000/01 was the earliest point at which usable data was available from all the relevant sources: from the former Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) for data on students registered at FECs for higher education and other higher level qualifications; from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) for students registered at HEIs for higher education qualifications, including institutional credit; and from the HEFCE for students registered at HEIs for higher education qualifications but taught at FECs for some or all of their studies.

We also draw on data provided by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to compare patterns of higher education in England with those in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This data is for 2001/02 and excludes the Open University. Here and in other parts of the report we exclude information on the Open University and institutional credit because the data for the different levels of undergraduate education is not available. Elsewhere, we include such data to illustrate the different shape of higher education in the two sectors of higher education and (then) further education. In Appendix 2, we discuss some of the difficulties in using and integrating these data sources.

In the second main section of the report, we draw on the findings of a questionnaire survey and nine case studies undertaken by members of the research team. Where existing statistical sources enabled us to identify quantitative dimensions of difference, we collected our own data to indicate qualitative aspects of difference, diversity and distinctiveness.

The questionnaire survey was targeted at the HE coordinator in FECs. Distributed by e-mail, the questionnaire invited respondents to offer their thoughts and perceptions on the difference between higher education level courses delivered in colleges and similar provision taught in HEIs. We received responses from 71 out of the 193 FECs surveyed: a response rate of 37%. Responses came from institutions with very different sizes and types of higher education activity. Information about the design and response to the survey, including a copy of the survey instrument, is given at Appendix 3.

The case studies were conducted in nine matched pairs of HE and FE institutions delivering the same higher education programme. In all but one case these were pairs of courses in franchise partnerships. The programmes included: four HNDs in business and computing subjects; two first degrees in business studies and combined studies respectively; a foundation year; an in-service postgraduate certificate in education; and a professional course for teachers of a second language. In each case study, a short questionnaire was completed by the course leader in the HEI and the FEC, and was followed by an interview. In addition, focus groups with students were undertaken in 15 out of 18 institutions. Information on the sample of institutions and the case study methods, including copies of the various instruments, is given at Appendix 4.
Quantitative dimensions

A dual pattern?

In the post-Dearing years, the elevation of higher education in further education in national policy coincided with a reassertion of a dual system of post-secondary education as well as a radical reform of the non-higher education sector (DfEE 1999). The Learning and Skills Act of 2000 maintained the principle of two sectors but extended the scope of the former further education sector to include government-funded training and workforce development, sixth forms in school, and adult and community learning. This new and enlarged sector is styled the learning and skills sector or the post-16 learning sector. These are the divided structures that define the present organisational and operational conditions for higher education in the learning and skills sector. In the statistical pictures presented in this section we compare the scale, shape and pattern of higher education offered in the two sectors. Since all the higher education in the post-16 sector is delivered through the FECs, we limit our descriptions and comparisons to this part of the learning and skills system.

As highlighted in , higher education is a very small fraction of the work of FE colleges as a whole whereas college-based higher education is a larger proportion of all higher education. Those enrolled on higher education courses represented just 4% of students in FECs in 2000/01 (150 000 out of some 3.7 million students in 444 FE establishments). This is a similar figure to the 5% of students enrolled on further education courses in the HEIs. Excluding the Open University and students taught in colleges under franchise arrangements, those enrolled on higher education programmes in FECs represent around 12% of the total higher education population (150 000 out of nearly 1.4 million higher education students).

What is obvious, yet important, about these higher education proportions is the minority size and status of the college-based contribution in relation to each sector. As will be seen, scale is a key dimension of difference highlighted in this report, whether expressed at the level of the post-secondary system and its sectors, or as manifest in the micro settings of courses and classes.

A shared mission?

As in other parts of the United Kingdom, higher education in FE colleges in England is mainly concerned with qualifications at levels below the first degree. However, a major source of difficulty surrounding claims for distinctiveness is that, unlike in Scotland, FECs and HEIs in England pursue a shared mission in respect of sub-degree higher education (see Figure 2).

In Scotland, where short-cycle vocational qualifications – the HND and HNC in particular – are largely the preserve of FE colleges, and where colleges enrol around a third of all HE students in the system, there is a real sense in which colleges operate their own system of short-cycle vocational higher education, one that is not duplicated in the HE sector. That system is based on a national framework of vocationally related and unitised qualifications, with colleges funded directly - by their own funding body - to pursue these objectives.

In England, by contrast, the HND and HNC are offered by both sectors, and a smaller proportion of students – about one in nine – are studying for higher education and higher level qualifications in the further education sector. Furthermore, colleges are funded directly and indirectly for their higher education, and their qualifications are awarded and quality assured by a range of bodies, including the HEIs. Although HNDs and HNCs are the main sub-degree qualifications offered in FECs in the English system, and more of them are taught in the colleges than elsewhere, the HEIs are nevertheless the largest providers of undergraduate education at levels below the first degree (Table 1).
Figure 1  Students in HEIs (excluding the Open University) and FECs by level of study, England, 2000/01

Number of students, 100 000s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HEIs</th>
<th>FE qualifications</th>
<th>FECs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HE qualifications</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FE qualifications</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other qualifications</td>
<td>■</td>
<td>■</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: FEFC and HESA

Figure 2  Higher education students in HEIs (excluding the Open University) and FECs in the United Kingdom by country and level of study, 2001/02

Number of students, 100 000s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>England HEIs</th>
<th>England FECs</th>
<th>Scotland HEIs</th>
<th>Scotland FECs</th>
<th>Wales HEIs</th>
<th>Wales FECs</th>
<th>Northern Ireland HEIs</th>
<th>Northern Ireland FECs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other undergraduate</td>
<td>First degree</td>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>Level 1 and entry</td>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td>Level 3</td>
<td>Other undergraduate</td>
<td>First degree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: DfES
One feature of the larger share of sub-degree higher education found in HEIs is their near monopoly of DipHE and CertHE qualifications, much of which reflects the arrival of nursing in undergraduate education. Accounting for over a third of the qualifications offered at the other undergraduate levels in the HE sector, the DipHE and CertHE have no real presence in the colleges. Although FECs also offer a wide range of higher level diploma and certificate qualifications, no one type of qualification is dominant or distinctive within this provision. The one exception to this pattern is the freestanding NVQ at Levels 4 and 5, which seems to be exclusive to the post-16 sector.

Apart from the focus of colleges on short-cycle and sub-degree programmes, the other broad difference between their own provision and that in HEIs is the part-time nature of most, but not all, of their higher education. Like the rest of provision in colleges, HE in FE is undertaken mainly by part-time students. However, the contrast between FECs and HEIs narrows considerably if only other undergraduate education is compared. Although the difference is not wide, the proportion of part-time students in other undergraduate education is lower for FECs than for HEIs, reflecting the relatively large numbers studying for the full-time HND in colleges.

### Table 1 Students undertaking higher education and higher level qualifications in HEIs and FECs by level and type of qualification, England, 2000/01

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>HEIs at 1000s</th>
<th>FECs at 1000s</th>
<th>All at 1000s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>282.2 (56%)</td>
<td>8.0 (93%)</td>
<td>290.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First degree</td>
<td>761.9 (10%)</td>
<td>24.9 (31%)</td>
<td>786.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other undergraduate</td>
<td>183.7 (61%)</td>
<td>91.2 (56%)</td>
<td>274.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HND</td>
<td>24.4 (12%)</td>
<td>39.6 (15%)</td>
<td>63.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HNC</td>
<td>5.6 (99%)</td>
<td>43.1 (91%)</td>
<td>48.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DipHE</td>
<td>47.1 (23%)</td>
<td>1.7 (25%)</td>
<td>48.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CertHE</td>
<td>15.7 (94%)</td>
<td>0.6 (82%)</td>
<td>16.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other undergrad. diplomas and certificates</td>
<td>56.8 (82%)</td>
<td>4.3 (77%)</td>
<td>61.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional qualifications at undergraduate level</td>
<td>19.7 (94%)</td>
<td>0.2 (89%)</td>
<td>19.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other qualifications at undergraduate level</td>
<td>14.4 (85%)</td>
<td>1.8 (81%)</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher level qualifications</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>63.1 (87%)</td>
<td>63.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NVQ Level 4 and 5</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>20.8 (93%)</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other higher level qualifications</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>42.4 (84%)</td>
<td>42.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional credit</td>
<td>237.5 (99%)</td>
<td>0.1 (96%)</td>
<td>237.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All levels and types</td>
<td>1465.3 (40%)</td>
<td>187.3 (65%)</td>
<td>1652.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentage part-time in brackets. Sources: FEFC, HEFCE and HESA.
More diversity?

Notwithstanding these overlapping territories, the higher education located in the further education sector retains a diversity and complexity all of its own. The nature of this provision defies easy generalisation and its statistical description involves combining data from different sources, each with their own systems of collection and categorisation. For England, we bring together statistical data for the year 2000/01, the most recent date for reasonably reliable information from published sources.

The enumeration of HE in FE in Table 1 is based on two kinds of higher education (prescribed and non-prescribed) and two forms of funding (direct and indirect). Between them, they result in three sets of provision. First, and most numerous, are courses of prescribed higher education funded directly by the HEFCE, assessed directly by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and offered by the colleges in their own right. In 2000/01, some 87 000 students were enrolled on these programmes, nearly half of the 187 000 students taught across the three sets of provision. This category includes those studying for first-degree and postgraduate qualifications, with the other three-quarters of students enrolled at the other undergraduate levels (mostly for HND and HNC).

The second set of courses is also an example of prescribed HE but they are funded indirectly through franchise agreements between HEIs and FECs. These programmes are taught in the colleges, in whole or in part, but formal responsibility for the students and the quality and standards of their programmes rests with the HEI as the institution in receipt of HEFCE funding. In 2000/01, around 37 000 students were registered at an HEI and taught in a FE establishment. As with directly funded prescribed HE, the majority of students were studying for other undergraduate qualifications (mainly HND), a quarter were registered for a first degree and a small number were following postgraduate studies.

The third area of provision is described in legislation as non-prescribed HE, although its description as higher education is not recognised in some quarters. A more common appellation is provision leading to higher level qualifications. Around one-half of the 63 000 non-prescribed students registered with FECs were pursuing NVQs at Levels 4 and 5. The remainder were studying for a wide assortment of professional, technical and vocational qualifications awarded by numerous external bodies. The reluctance to consider these two groups of qualifications as higher education is mainly to do with the nature of the awards. The general absence of a formal course of study in NVQs has led some to reject its designation as higher education. In the case of the ‘other’ higher level qualifications in the non-prescribed category, these have yet to be systematically assessed or formally recognised by the quality bodies in either sector, and their status remains unclear.

Given that part-time study is characteristic of most higher education in FECs, the age profile of students is older than in HEIs, especially those aged 25 and over. This is particularly the case in non-prescribed higher education where students are likely to be undertaking higher level qualifications linked to their continuing professional development. Unlike prescribed and franchise courses in FECs, these qualifications also attract more women than men. The age and gender of students engaged in the three types of higher education in colleges is shown in Figures 3 and 4, alongside that for students registered and taught in HEIs.
Figure 3  Students studying for higher education and higher level qualifications at HEIs (excluding the Open University) and FECs by age, England, 2000/01

Number of students, 100 000s

- Registered and taught at HEI
- Registered at HEI and taught at FEC
- Registered on prescribed HE at FEC
- Registered on non-prescribed HE at FEC

Sources: FEFC, HEFCE and HESA

Figure 4  Students studying for higher education and higher level qualifications at HEIs (excluding the Open University) and FECs by gender, England, 2000/01

Number of students, 100 000s

- Registered and taught at HEI
- Registered at HEI and taught at FEC
- Registered on prescribed HE at FEC
- Registered on non-prescribed HE at FEC

Sources: FEFC, HEFCE and HESA
Around 340 FE establishments deliver one or more of these three sorts of provision, albeit usually in small amounts. Much of this provision is concentrated in some of the larger colleges. The rest is widely scattered. Indeed, just 57 further education colleges are responsible for half the total number of students studying at these levels. Even so, most FECs offering higher education (just over 200) have students in each of the three categories. The size and scope of the higher education in individual FECs have implications for the mission and organisation of the college, its significance in institutional plans and resource strategies, and the nature of the learning experience offered to students.

A number of the colleges with the largest student numbers have argued in favour of concentration. Whether expressed in terms of economies of scale, infrastructures for higher education, or the benefits that critical mass can bring to the quality of the student experience, some of these colleges have regarded themselves as quite different from other FECs; and, because of the size of their higher education, they have sought to be treated differently by the relevant authorities. Our concern here is not to assess the merits of concentration or dispersal, but rather to highlight just how diverse is the character and composition of the provision in each institution, large or small.

Underneath the curve showing different volumes of provision at each institution are significant variations in the profile of courses and qualifications. For all FE colleges, we illustrate this differentiation in relation to modes of study and forms of funding (Figures 5 and 6). For the 20 largest FE providers of higher education, we illustrate similar variation in respect of types of provision and qualification aims (Figures 7 and 8).

Franchising: more of the same?

The indirect funding of higher education in FE colleges through franchising was not favoured by the Dearing inquiry, yet soon after it reported franchising was adopted as one of three funding options offered to FECs by the HEFCE. Institutions were able to choose between direct funding, indirect funding through HEIs (franchising), and funding through consortia composed of clusters of FECs and HE establishments. Furthermore, colleges were able, if they wanted, to continue with multiple funding routes, although the HEFCE gave a strong steer in favour of collaborative arrangements.

When the HEFCE became responsible for all the postgraduate, first-degree and other undergraduate education previously funded by the FEFC, it had to deal directly with another 200 FECs, bringing the total to 270. However, as a result of some colleges choosing to be funded indirectly through franchising or consortia, the number had been reduced to 202 by 2001/02.

In this way, franchising and funding through HEFCE-recognised consortia have become important and distinctive features of HE in FE. In some respects, this is similar to the situation in Wales but very different to that in Scotland where franchising is a minor phenomenon.

In England, this importance has increased in recent years as franchising has proved to be the main or only way that colleges have been able to secure additional numbers for their courses of prescribed higher education. According a recent review of indirect funding arrangements undertaken for the HEFCE, there were 75 HEIs and 289 FECs involved in indirect funding partnerships in England in 2002/03. In other words, over half of the total of HE establishments and around two-thirds of FE institutions were party to such arrangements (HEFCE 2003).
Figure 5  All FECs offering courses leading to higher education and higher level qualifications by mode of study, England, 2000/01

Number of students, 1000s

Further education colleges

Full time
Part time
Sources: FEFC, HEFCE and HESA
Figure 6  All FECs offering directly and indirectly funded courses of prescribed higher education, England, 2000/01

Number of students, 1000s

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Number of students, 1000s</th>
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<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>0.5</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further education colleges

- Directly funded
- Indirectly funded

Sources: FEFC, HEFCE and HESA
Figure 7  Top 20 FECs offering courses of prescribed, franchised and non-prescribed higher education, England, 2000/01

Figure 8  Top 20 FECs offering courses leading to higher education and higher level qualifications by qualification type, England, 2000/01
More significant again, the 2003 White Paper on higher education has proposed that ‘structured partnerships’ – franchise or consortium arrangements funded through partner HEIs – should be the primary vehicles by which colleges play their part in delivering the new foundation degree. These short-cycle degree programmes are intended to become the standard two-year higher education qualification and, between 2003 and 2005, it is planned to integrate existing HNDs and HNCs into the foundation degree framework.

In 2000/01, franchise students accounted for 30% of all those taught on courses of prescribed higher education in the colleges (Figure 9). Given slack demand for higher education in the post-Dearing years, especially for HNDs and HNCs, franchising was a means by which the post-16 sector was able to maintain rather than increase its share of higher education. Franchise arrangements brought students into FECs at the postgraduate, undergraduate and other undergraduate levels, yet with a higher proportion of full-time numbers than those registered by colleges themselves. Where full-time students were a majority on franchised courses, they were a minority on the prescribed programmes offered by the colleges in their own right. The franchised contribution was particularly strong for first degree and HND courses.

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**Figure 9** Students studying for higher education and higher level qualifications at HEIs and FECs, England, 2000/01

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- Registered
- Franchised
- Franchised out to FEC

Sources: FEFC, HEFCE and HESA
Qualitative dimensions

Opportunities for comparison?

One assumption underpinning judgements about difference and distinctiveness is that comparisons can be made in valid and reliable ways. The comparative task is somewhat easier at the level of the system, where the statistical coverage is national, than at the level of individual institutions, courses and their staff and students. Up to this point, most of the report has been concerned with cross-sector patterns and with variation within the learning and skills sector, but even here we have not examined higher education provision in different categories of college. Although offered mainly in general FE colleges, higher education is a significant component in specialist colleges as well as a new area in sixth form colleges.

A more detailed and sophisticated comparison would also involve distinguishing between different types of HE establishment. In the higher education sector, the HND and HNC are offered predominantly by the post-1992 universities and among this group are the largest franchising HE institutions. A more ambitious study might range across the whole of post-secondary education, looking at the interface between the higher and further education in both major sectors.

Nor have we considered the extent to which HE courses leading to the same awards differ in their curriculum and delivery. Clearly, there are some programmes that, in their subject focus or specialism, are specific to the post-16 sector. Furthermore, in both sectors, devolved arrangements for the validation of HNDs and HNCs have also made for increased pluralism. Non-prescribed higher education is different again. Occupying a zone beyond the reach (as yet) of the national inspection and assessment regimes, this diverse and loose collection of awards has remained apart, with no obvious counterparts or comparators in the rest of the system.

At the same time, subject-by-subject comparison of the external assessments of quality and standards of HE provision in the two sectors is no longer available to inform our judgements. Where previously subject assessment by the QAA provided for direct, albeit contested, comparisons of the quality of programmes in HEIs and those in colleges, the introduction of the new system of academic review has meant that reliable comparisons can only be made between courses within the FE sector.

Unlike other kinds of higher education in the colleges, and not necessarily tied to QAA requirements, franchising has created the opportunity to compare courses which were identical in their basic design and intended learning outcomes yet delivered in different institutional settings. For those involved in franchising arrangements there was a ready basis for informed comparison. Even here, however, it is not always the case that the particular course franchised to the college is also taught at the franchising HEI. There are also examples, though few, where the franchised course is taught mainly by staff from the HEI.

In the rest of this report, we consider more qualitative dimensions of difference, including the ways that distinctiveness is conceived by those responsible for coordinating the higher education provision in their FECs (referred to here as ‘HE coordinators’) and the course leaders in nine pairs of HEIs and FECs (referred to here as ‘HE course leaders’ or ‘FE course leaders’). The warrant for the findings from these sources is the light they shed on the comparative conditions for the delivery of paired or parallel provision. We also consider the views of students on these courses, collected through 15 focus groups (involving over 150 students). Of all the parties, students were probably those least in a position to compare the characteristics of their programmes with other provision, but we were interested in what they found most worthwhile or troublesome about their respective courses.
As might be expected, staff occupying different institutional positions and locations make comparisons on a variety of bases. For example, HE coordinators in FECs (in the questionnaire study) made frequent reference to comments and feedback from QAA assessments, adducing that standards were high and that courses in FECs were adding more value than equivalent programmes in HEIs. This was attributed to the generally lower starting points of students commencing their higher education in colleges. In contrast, HE and FE course leaders (in the case studies) believed there were no major differences between the qualifications on entry to their courses, reflecting a different context for judging similarities and differences.

Whereas the main point of reference for HE coordinators was the college and its portfolio of higher education, for course leaders in partnership schemes it was the specific programme they taught day-to-day in the HEI and the FEC. Yet, even here, at course level, the stimulus and the capacity to compare were different in each sector. In a franchise arrangement, the HEI is formally responsible for the students and accountable for all aspects of finance, administration and quality relating to their courses. In these circumstances, the course leader in an HEI has a responsibility to compare and, through this monitoring role, has more opportunity to acquire a comparative understanding. In addition, two of the course tutors in HEIs in the study had previously worked in FE, but there were no examples of college tutors who had previously worked in HE. For these reasons, course leaders in HEIs tended to have greater information and contact with their partner institution than that experienced by course leaders in FECs.

The essence of difference?

In comparing the prescribed and non-prescribed higher education in their colleges with similar or equivalent provision in HEIs, the HE course coordinators in FECs placed emphasis on features which were different or distinctive about their institutions, courses and students. Interestingly, little or no reference was made to the sector characteristics of higher education in the learning and skills sector, the subject of the previous part of this bulletin.

For people in these positions, as well as for those interviewed in our case studies, the source and essence of difference - large or small, real or imagined, asserted or evidenced - was expected to be found in the traditions, conditions and exchanges which characterised the teaching and learning context in colleges. Embedded in this overarching statement are a series of separate but interconnected claims about the ethos, pedagogy and scale of learning in college settings. We examine these claims in terms of the kinds of questions, empirical and conceptual, they pose for future research. Where appropriate, we consider these claims alongside the indicative findings of our case studies.

A question of scale?

The smaller size and greater intimacy of teaching and learning groups in FECs is a key dimension of difference which links to other aspects of the student (and staff) experience of college-based higher education. In our case studies, the size of teaching groups in full-time courses was markedly different. In the universities, lecture sizes for full-time programmes routinely reached 50–150, with tutorial groups of 15–20. The size of the latter was more like the typical class size in colleges. If college groups exceeded 20, they were likely to be split. Differences were normally much less for part-time groups in each sector, except where these students had to access subject options during the day. Several HE coordinators claimed that ‘contact hours for students are often higher than in the same course in HE – so they have more staff contact’. However, this view was not supported by the evidence supplied by course leaders. In all but one of the paired courses in question, there was little variation.
In our course pairs, the number of staff allocated to programmes in the HEIs tended to be much larger than in the franchised versions in FECs. In the universities, where there was a bigger spread of specialist staff, it ranged from seven to 15+. In the colleges, it ranged from two to seven. Similarly, teaching loads were larger in the FECs where around 650+ contact hours per year was normal, with two colleges requiring 800+ hours. Most of the college staff were teaching courses at both higher and further education levels and the time they were allowed for management responsibilities was much less than in the HEIs. Nevertheless, many college staff were encouraged to gain higher qualifications and some universities provided staff development workshops for the college staff as part of the franchise arrangements. For teachers in FECs, the HND or HNC was at the upper end of the hierarchy of status attached to courses. In the HEIs, such programmes were near the bottom of the academic hierarchy.

A question of teaching and learning?

Among our parallel courses, differences in the content of the curriculum were relatively minor (not surprisingly since most were franchised) and in most cases the curriculum was identical. However, in one case where courses were delivered in a consortium, college staff had an ongoing informal involvement in revision and development, even though the curriculum was designed by the university. Unusually, perhaps, the consortium paid members of the network for the production of course materials so that college staff could have a recognised input. An employer input into the curriculum, on the other hand, was negligible among our parallel courses. The one exception to this was where the courses led to a specific in-service qualification offered on a part-time basis.

Nor were there major differences in the teaching methods adopted in each setting. Only in two colleges did respondents contrast their methods with those in use at the universities, although the exact nature of these differences was not clear: ‘we’re much better with HND students’. In the questionnaire survey, however, HE coordinators were as one in their claim that colleges offered more student-centred delivery, together with a greater variety of teaching styles and with more time and attention given to individual students. One described this as a mix of ‘some formal lectures/seminars which mirror HE’ and approaches which are ‘very student-centred, mumsy sort of interactive sessions’. Even in the non-prescribed higher level provision, the HE coordinators claimed to offer more sympathetic timetabling and flexibility of attendance, although the key feature here was the emphasis on employment, ‘on actual working life’, ‘career progression’ and ‘links with employers and business’.

A common theme in discussion about the different conditions for higher education in the two sectors is the assumption that staff in HEIs will be researchers as well as teachers and that those in FECs will have teaching as their sole or single most important responsibility. Our evidence presented a more blurred and fluid picture. A number of HE coordinators pointed to the lack of opportunities for research and a small number reported that efforts were being made to give staff some time for research and scholarly activity, although this was quite small. In the case studies, the course leaders in HEIs reported that they did little in the way of research, except for occasional work on pedagogical and course-related studies. Neither was there pressure on them to engage with research and it was not given any priority in their personal timetables.

Thus, at the level of teaching for HNDs, foundation degrees and the early years of first-degree programmes, teaching in both settings was not necessarily conducted by staff who were themselves engaged in research. For those teaching at these levels, they were neither expected nor granted any significant time to pursue research, although scholarship was doubtless included and expected as part of the teaching function.
A question of support?

In both university and college settings, there were marked differences in student support mechanisms. In the HEIs, academic and personal support was much more likely to be provided centrally to all students: and there was an impressive array of specialist services available. In the FECs, by contrast, the most common model of support was that offered within the class and as part of normal teaching. External sources of advice and guidance were available, but most college teachers regarded individual student support as part of their everyday role. In many cases, the teaching of study skills and the conventions of academic writing were part of the standard curriculum in FECs, and no assumptions were made about their prior acquisition. On the other hand, this was also the case with some of the courses taught in HEIs, particularly those with course designs linked to external awarding bodies and part-time evening programmes where other forms of support were sometimes difficult for students to access.

In the questionnaire survey, learning support was a core element in the claim to distinctiveness. The way in which learning support was delivered and the commitment of staff to this aspect of their work were key to understanding the nature of HE in FE. It was ‘very hands on, personal’ and it had a ‘strong tutorial base’ and ‘an informal atmosphere’. Because many staff had themselves been mature students and were from working-class backgrounds, they had ‘more empathy’ and were ‘more sensitive to a wide ability range’. They had an ‘ethos of individual attention and nurturing’ and, as one respondent argued, it was about ‘always being there for them – the norm is to be available outside timetabled sessions’. The idea of a nurturing environment was the foundation for the FE ethos and was seen to contrast strongly with the specialised, centralised and professionalised model of support in the HEIs.

A question of resources?

Even in FECs with a significant amount of higher level work, the teaching of higher education courses is nearly always a minority activity. The existence of separate centres or campuses for higher education might allow for concentration of resources and the forging of a strong identity. Nevertheless, this provision must compete for attention and support from the rest of the college. Except perhaps where HE and FE are joint missions, as in the self-styled ‘mixed economy’ colleges, the dominant further education culture is likely to shape the character of the higher education effort. This might be to the advantage of higher education activity, securing its distinctive style and demeanour. Equally, it might serve to query or undermine the conditions for the conduct of higher level work.

In our questionnaire survey, we expected to hear more about the difficulties experienced by colleges and their staff in delivering higher education on the basis of FE conditions of service; or without access to the capital and other funds normally available to institutions in the HE sector. If members of course teams had been the target of the survey, rather than HE coordinators, the pattern of response might have been different. Nevertheless, most respondents bemoaned the lack of resources to underpin their higher education, especially in relation to their library, sports and social facilities. Sometimes, however, the smaller scale of the activity in colleges meant that the ratio of texts to students was better than in HEIs.

In the case studies, complaints about resources were generally fewer: most of the colleges had dedicated space for their higher education and course leaders reported good resource provision in relation to IT and access to computers. The universities were more likely to have 24/7 access to computing and internet facilities and, although college-based students were entitled to use these and the library facilities, very few chose to do so (except for online provision). However, students in both sectors who were studying in the evening complained of poor provision, especially the quality and level of administrative support for their courses. Given the much larger class sizes in HEIs, full-time students often also found themselves competing for learning resources, such as books and access to computers.
A question of ethos?
As prefigured in these findings, central to the claim to difference or distinctiveness is the idea of an ‘FE ethos’. As one course leader in FE explained: ‘we provide a welcoming atmosphere, an effective support network plus smaller group size with greater tutorial support’. Another considered that the staff were ‘different’: ‘they have an interest in personal care in terms of teaching and learning’. For most of our respondents, then, the various elements that make up the notion of ethos – space, pedagogy, support, resources – are clear.

However, as elsewhere in our report, some caution is required regarding the generality of these claims. Some elements in the idea of ethos are specific to FE provision, such as the size of classes in full-time higher education courses. Other features could be found in both sectors, such as the skills-based teaching required on some vocational sub-degree programmes and the types of tutor support this entailed. Similarly, the contrast drawn between research-focused lecturers in HEIs and caring teachers in FECs is far too simplistic.

Managing difference?
One of our objectives in this study was to adopt a broad view of what constituted higher education in the learning and skills sector. We were particularly keen to include non-prescribed higher education in this domain, even though its status was unclear. In asking HE coordinators to describe the distinctiveness of provision in the colleges, we also invited them to comment separately and comparatively on the features of prescribed and non-prescribed higher education. However, most respondents found it easier to talk about the former rather than the latter and, revealingly, some had to make special efforts to find out just how much non-prescribed activity there was in their institution.

What is clear from our findings is that prescribed and non-prescribed higher education in FECs are managed quite differently. The HE coordinators are usually responsible for just the prescribed provision and, as members of the senior management team or as senior staff with a cross-college role, they usually have a remit for all the directly and indirectly funded prescribed higher education. Non-prescribed higher education is usually managed course-by-course at the department level. It is rarely viewed as a whole or combined, in policy and practice, with its prescribed neighbours.

The recent HEFCE review of indirect funding arrangements has reported in some depth on the management and organisation of franchise partnerships in England. In our interview studies, these relationships were characterised as ‘good’ and ‘cooperative’ by most respondents, although the forms and extent of management exercised by the HEIs varied considerably. Such arrangements encompassed a wide range of practices, including the HEI providing the curriculum materials for the college to use in its teaching and, in another example, the HEI vetting the CVs of college staff as part of its responsibilities for quality assurance. In the majority of cases these processes were described without comment: they were just ‘normal’ activities, expected and accepted. As one respondent put it: ‘We do as we are told and get on with it’.

Thus a cooperative framework was also one of oversight, control and accountability. Some HEIs struck a somewhat authoritarian stance, with formal boards, detailed curriculum control, and written permission required to change course materials or the staff delivering them. Others were more paternalistic, requiring frequent informal meetings and allowing for input by FE staff. Others again were essentially laissez-faire, involving ‘occasional contact by e-mail when necessary’. Whatever the relationship, the overwhelming view was that these mechanisms worked and that students in both sectors received an equivalent higher education experience. This was perhaps less than surprising given that all our respondents were routinely responsible for implementing these arrangements and ensuring their effective working.
One area of control delegated to colleges was student selection, with university guidelines being followed by the colleges and staff expressing satisfaction with the criteria used and the retention and progression rates achieved. In our franchise schemes, there was little evidence of lower qualified students being directed towards the colleges. In our questionnaire survey, on the other hand, it was clear that HE coordinators believed that the lower qualified students tended to apply to the FECs. In fact, at two of the colleges in the case studies there were complaints that the partner university had lowered its entry qualifications and that this had adversely affected their intake figures.

Local and internal recruitment provided the bulk of the HE students in FECs, with some university courses, particularly part-time certificates, recruiting in a similar manner. However, most (but not all) full-time university courses in our sample had a wider geographical appeal. Nevertheless, this difference in the reach of recruitment did not appear to result in a more highly qualified intake. Our case studies suggested that both colleges and universities used recruitment to HNDs as a way of providing a possible degree route for students who did not hold the necessary or appropriate entry scores for a first-degree programme. However, their recruitment and progression data indicated that the HND was more likely to be viewed as an end-qualification for students in the colleges and, more strongly, as a stepping-stone to a first degree for students in the universities. Indeed, the courses were often marketed in this way.

In some universities, assumptions about progression had caused retention problems. For example, one HE course tutor claimed that ‘the university has placed no ceiling on our numbers as this is an easy-to-recruit HND course and makes up for the shortfalls in other subjects. As a consequence we took in many during clearing, with a significant minority of “drifters” who did not survive year one’. The college linked to this university claimed to be more strict in its entry requirements.

In all, three universities and one college admitted to significant retention problems, with drop-out rates of 20–40% at the end of the first year, often attributed to financial difficulties. As one university course tutor stated: ‘Pressure on student finances has led to students working longer to support themselves. This in turn is leading to poor attendance and patterns of failure.’ However, the other 14 institutions in our sample claimed good retention rates.

Tutors also claimed that progression to degree-level study was satisfactory from both HND to degree within universities and from college courses to various levels of degree courses in the university, although progression rules varied: in some cases HND students were admitted to year two of the degree programme, and in some to year three. In one case, the students progressing from the university course entered year three and those from the college course entered year two on the assumption that the college students needed an extra year to reach degree standard.

Overall, and contrary to experience reported in some other studies, very little tension was revealed between HEIs and FECs over the recruitment, retention and progression of students. Given the slim evidence base on which to assess these and other claims, the whole issue of competition and collaboration in the recruitment and progression of students deserves detailed investigation.

Different students?

The difficulties involved in describing the pattern of HE qualifications and courses in the post-16 sector are compounded if attempts are made to describe the background and profile of students attending these programmes. In part, these difficulties stem from our wish to identify and include franchise students among those receiving their higher education in further education settings. From our statistical sources, we do no more than report on the age and gender of these students. Other characteristics, such as socio-economic background and the highest qualification on entry, are not sufficiently robust to allow for comparison. If franchise students are not central to the analysis, then a wider range of information can be presented for higher education students in one or both sectors (Little et al. 2003).
Across the three main categories of college-based higher education (directly funded, indirectly funded and non-prescribed) those aged 21 and over were clear majorities (see Figure 3). Students aged 25 and over represented some three-quarters of those on non-prescribed programmes (reflecting the post-experience nature of much of this provision) and this age group made up nearly half those on directly funded and franchised programmes of prescribed higher education. Excluding those studying for institutional credit, those on first-degree and other undergraduate courses in HEIs were generally younger. There was also a higher proportion of women studying in the higher education sector. In FE establishments, by contrast, women were only a majority in the non-prescribed category (see Figure 4).

A question of widening participation?

In addition to the distinctive characteristics of the teaching and learning undertaken in college settings, our HE coordinators emphasised the different profile of the students attracted and recruited to their higher education courses. Those who joined prescribed programmes were typified as ‘widening participation students’: ‘mostly mature and with other commitments’, ‘often with no family tradition of HE’, ‘mostly without standard entry qualifications’, ‘second chance learners’, ‘low achievers’, ‘students who need a high level of input on skills for learning’, and ‘students who would not be successful in an HE environment’. Similar views were expressed by the course leaders in FECs: their students were among those whose ‘parents did not attend HE’, who were unlikely to ‘acquire HE qualifications in other ways’, and who were ‘from deprived backgrounds’. When discussing part-time courses however they pointed to similarities in the backgrounds and qualifications of students in both sectors.

Most HE coordinators knew little about the students on non-prescribed courses. Those that did, made it clear that these students were perceived rather differently. One respondent referred to them as customers rather than students. They were not always local and, where courses were specialist or otherwise tailored to niche markets, their recruitment might be regional and national.

In contrast, the course tutors in our case study HEIs did not generalise about their students in the same way. They characterised them as a mixture of young and mature, local and national, and only when referring to part-time students as predominantly career motivated did they make statements about ‘their students’, in the way that the course tutors in FECs did in relation to college students more generally.

A question of localness?

Nevertheless, for most respondents, a defining characteristic of the higher education students in FECs was their ‘localness’. Such students were ‘unlikely to be geographically mobile’ and many had moved into their higher education programme from another course in the college. Among those who participated in our focus groups, nearly all of the college-based students (59/65) and over half of the university-based students (43/76) considered themselves as coming from the local area. The same proportions also reported these as their first choice institutions.

However, ‘local’ was a more ambiguous concept than it first appeared. For example, on one university course students claimed to have chosen it because it was ‘local’, although the institution was in fact some distance from their home; and the majority of students on one college-based course gave locality as the reason for their choice, even though the partner university was only one mile away. For some, therefore, the idea of localness meant familiarity with staff and the academic environment, usually based on previous study at the college. For others, localness meant accessibility of the timetable and course organisation: for example, a three-day week in college that enabled the students to maintain employment and meet family commitments so that ‘time and finances are manageable’.

Localness tended to be important for older students in colleges but was important too for younger students at the university or college who wished to live at home while studying for their higher education qualification, or who needed to live at home for financial reasons. For students in both sectors, the concept of local is cultural and material as much as geographical. Whatever the complexity, localness is a key factor in student choice. However, it is important to note that in some specialist colleges or specialist courses, students were recruited nationally. Moreover, in one of our parallel courses, 85% of the students at the FEC were recruited from overseas.
A question of experience?

Is the experience of students in university and college settings similar or different? Clearly, most students had little knowledge of the other sector, unless they had previously studied there (which a few in our sample had) or they had friends, family or other acquaintances who had been participants in college courses. What was most striking about the evidence from the focus groups was the shared, similar perceptions of what was valued or problematic about their higher education experience, wherever they studied.

For all but one of our focus groups the most worthwhile features of their HE experience were career prospects and job opportunities. This was true in both HEIs and FECs, for all modes of study and for all age groups. Typical among these were statements of the kind: ‘we are gaining skills, knowledge and qualifications for a career’, ‘it will give an avenue to jobs in any country’, and ‘getting a qualification that really counts towards a career’. This aspect of their HE experience was far more important than any other and the main reason they would recommend higher education study to others.

This was underpinned by a strong appreciation of the wider personal, social and educational development associated with higher education study: ‘contribution to confidence and character building’, ‘self knowledge’, and ‘improved transferable skills and social awareness’. Moreover, ‘it gives independence, socially and academically’, ‘it gives self knowledge of capabilities, the capacity to learn and study effectively’, and it creates opportunities for ‘meeting new people from different backgrounds’.

Their experience of tutor accessibility and support, together with concern for the quality of teaching, were important to students from both sectors, but in the colleges it was the small class sizes that were stressed much more frequently: ‘tutor access and support is good in our small classes’ and, equally prized, was ‘face-to-face contact with tutors’ and ‘individual attention’. In the college ‘the staff are accessible but it doesn’t feel like being at uni’. At the HEI, ‘the large numbers in class make life difficult and sometimes we have to fight for a seat’.

For younger students in universities, the opportunities to cultivate a social life and participate in ‘a lively social scene’ were an important factor in their rating of the wider higher education experience. For college students of a similar age this had not influenced their choice of institution but the absence of such a social scene meant that ‘it doesn’t feel like being at university’. Only a very small number of students commented directly on the range of reputations of institutions, although several mentioned this indirectly as part of the reason for their choice of a ‘university’. However, in neither setting was this issue dominant as a positive or negative factor in the choices students had made.

The most troublesome aspects of the HE experience were to do with the costs of study and student debt. These were highlighted by most focus groups, irrespective of their location of study. Costs had also helped shape their choice of course and institution: ‘student debt has been the most problematic aspect of the whole HE experience’ and ‘I’ve had to live at home because of the cost’. Other factors tended to be course specific rather than sector specific. Poor teaching was mentioned in several groups, but this was not specifically associated with HEIs or FECs; and only in one college course did the students think that their course was ‘less academically demanding than courses that our friends attend elsewhere’.

Problems of course administration were raised by students on several college-based programmes. In one college, the students believed that staff attempted to shift the blame by attributing problems to a failure of inter-institutional communication. Late information about deadlines and the management of option choices were additional complaints from students in both universities and colleges: ‘the quality of information about modules is poor’ and there were ‘restrictions on the range of subjects and options available’. Access to facilities was a problem for students in both sectors, especially for part-time and evening students. Those based in the colleges were only marginally more vocal in their dissatisfaction: ‘there is a lack of resources such as the correct level of books or research papers’ and ‘there is a lack of space, old buildings and overcrowded social areas’.
Overall, there was considerable agreement between students in both HEIs and FECs as to the high and low assessments of their higher education experience. The sense of a ‘college ethos’ was apparent among many FEC students in their praise of small classes and strong tutorial support. This was sometimes captured in comments about the nature of relationships in college environments: ‘there is more informality, a collegiality and a supportive friendly staff’. In one or two cases, this ethos was criticised as not being sufficiently challenging: ‘small classes are more comfortable but mean less competition’.

Conclusions

In analysing and reviewing these findings we draw four main conclusions. The first is that cross-sector comparisons, whatever their purposes, are precarious and have become harder to make in recent years. In part, this is a result of systems and categories of data collection that are not simply discordant but lag behind developments running across the two sectors. If, as proposed, indirect funding is to assume more significance in growth towards the 50% participation target and beyond, then the quality and coverage of national statistics will need to match these ambitions, especially if widening participation is a public policy goal. At the same time, one consequence of a relaxation of the intensity of quality assessment in higher education has been to reduce the potential for comparison between the sectors, although some in the colleges might not be unhappy about this retreat.

A second, and more compelling, conclusion of this study is the fragility of many of the claims to difference and distinctiveness. This is less to doubt the authority and veracity of the claims, but more to highlight their appeal to values, approaches and purposes that define ‘the FE ethos’. Given the divided and segmented character of higher education in the post-16 sector, together with its institutional and other diversities, it is not surprising that arguments for difference should rest on grounds unrelated to the academic division of labour in higher education. Colleges in England have some way to go if they wish to make short-cycle higher education their own. In contrast to Scotland, the English HEIs and FECs overlap in their provision of sub-degree higher education and, in recent years, franchising has increased the pluralism of higher education in the learning and skills sector. Moreover, following the 2003 White Paper, delivery of foundation degrees is no longer seen as a role reserved for colleges. On the contrary, the rationalisation of qualifications within the foundation-degree framework will make more apparent the shared mission of the (several) universities and the (many) colleges that operate in this territory.
Linked to this, we find evidence of divergence as well as convergence in these overlapping environments. Colleges sustain a size and intimacy that, in many respects, run counter to the scales and efficiencies demanded of mass higher education. There is a strength and a vulnerability in this situation. On the one side is a commitment to widen participation and maximise retention in settings that continue to teach and support small groups of students. On the other is an argument for colleges to be treated in ways that enable them to build the volume and quality of provision to become more like the major providers of higher education. If scale is a marker of difference and an indicator of divergence, there are other movements that signal stronger convergence as colleges are brought into more structured relationships with higher education establishments. At present, these arrangements allow for a variety of modes and styles of working, with some colleges more active in their partnerships than others.

Our final conclusion is to lend support to the idea that HE in FE is a hybrid: in some ways more akin to further education and in other respects more like higher education. This was a common thread in many of the observations and reflections of our respondents. For some, it was a working concept and an explicit claim: ‘a blend of the two but not a compromise’ and ‘a bit of each and a bridge between the two’. For us, the notion of a hybrid has the merit of bringing into relationship many of the elements sketched in this report. It relieves colleges too of the defensive language that has sometimes attached to recent positions. It is also a claim worthy of elaboration, especially if colleges in England are to be regarded as normal and necessary settings for higher education.

References


Appendix 1
Contributions and acknowledgements

The research for this study was conducted by a team led by Professor Gareth Parry at the University of Sheffield and comprising Penny Blackie, Pat Davies, David Smith, Anne Thompson and Jenny Williams. Additional contributions were made by Lesley Doyle, Miriam Griffiths, Brenda Morgan-Klein, Russell Moseley and Lynn Parker.

All but one of the statistical tables and charts in this report were composed by Jovan Luzajic at LSDA. The other was produced by the DfES at the request of the research team. Data was supplied by the DfES, LSC (for FEFC data), HESA and HEFCE, and we thank them for assisting with our inquiries at various points in the study. We would also like to thank Madeleine King at the LSC for her advice and support.

We are also grateful to Maggie Greenwood at LSDA for hosting joint meetings of the research teams for this project and for a parallel study of indirect funding agreements and arrangements between HEIs and FECs. This enabled researchers to plan activities and share findings to the advantage of both projects.

One of the outcomes of the research is a database of HE coordinators in FECs in England. The database was compiled by Monika Nollet at the LSDA and is located on the LSDA website.
Appendix 2

Statistical sources and uses

One of the main aims of the study was to present a comprehensive picture of the volume and pattern of higher education and higher level qualifications undertaken within the learning and skills sector. This involved assembling and comparing data on categories of provision that were not normally brought together or which were otherwise difficult to identify in the national statistics on higher and further education.

One of these categories related to data on students and courses where franchise arrangements were operated between HEIs and FECs. Since 2000, the HEFCE has published an annual set of data on students registered at an HEI establishment and taught (in part or whole) at another HEI or at an FEC. The first of these reported on the number and location of franchised students in 1998/99 (HEFCE 2000).

Another category related to information on students on non-prescribed courses of higher education, including those undertaking higher level national vocational qualifications. On this area of activity, a study for LSDA (Clark 2002) has illustrated some of the problems involved in deriving usable information from the individualised student record collected and published by the FEFC (and then the LSC).

The difficulties to be encountered producing, linking and comparing different data sources on higher education in further education, and the reasons for this, were discussed in an appendix to Closer by degrees: the past, present and future of higher education in further education colleges (Parry and Thompson 2002).

In this study, we combine data on HEIs (from HESA) and on FECs (from FEFC), with data from HEFCE on franchised students, to generate statistical pictures of two kinds: those which permit comparison of the pattern of higher education and higher level qualifications in the two sectors; and those which portray the pattern of higher education and higher level qualifications between and within individual FE colleges, including the top 20 largest providers of higher education.
Appendix 3

Questionnaire design and response

A questionnaire was designed to identify the claims made (if any) by those in FECs to difference and distinctiveness in the higher education provision offered by their colleges.

It was sent by e-mail to 193 FECs in England in March 2003 using a database of HE coordinators in FECs compiled for the study by LSDA. A total of 71 questionnaires were returned, a response rate of 37%. The size of the higher education student population in the respondent colleges, first for students on prescribed HE courses and second for students on non-prescribed HE programmes, was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of FTEs in prescribed HE</th>
<th>Number of respondent colleges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Up to 100 FTEs</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101 to 300 FTEs</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>301 to 450 FTEs</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 450 FTEs</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No reply</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Estimated number of FTEs and students in non-prescribed HE respondent colleges:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of FTEs</th>
<th>Number of respondent colleges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Up to 100</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101 to 300</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>300 + FTEs</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-total</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Student numbers:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Up to 100</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101 to 300</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>300 +</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-total</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None or N/A</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No reply</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FTE = full-time equivalent (student)

Although sent to the person identified as the ‘HE coordinator’ the replies came from individuals with a range of management roles at different levels in the FEC. Out of 71 replies 37 came from someone with the title HE coordinator (or manager, dean, adviser, director); one from an acting principal; eight from vice-principals; four from heads of advice or guidance services; 12 from the director of a central service (curriculum; quality; professional studies; ICT; business and employment services); four from heads of department, school or faculty; and five not clear.

A copy of the questionnaire and its accompanying letter is provided next.
What, if anything, is different or distinctive about HE in FE?
A questionnaire to FE college managers with overall responsibility for HE provision

This short questionnaire is asking for your views about what, if anything, is different or distinctive about HE in FE. The questionnaire is one element in a research project managed by the Learning and Skills Development Agency and designed to inform its work on expanding participation in higher education. The research team is led by Professor Gareth Parry at the University of Sheffield, with members drawn from FE colleges and HE institutions.

The main aim of the research is to identify the salient or defining features of HE offered in the context of FE colleges. We are, of course, aware of the variety of HE and higher level qualifications offered in FE colleges. For example:

- some types of HE are offered by both FE colleges and HE institutions whereas other areas of HE are provided largely or exclusively by FE colleges
- some HE courses are provided by FE colleges in their own right while other programmes are delivered whole or in part by FE colleges on behalf of partner HE institutions
- some FE colleges are major providers of HE and others possess only small pockets of HE provision.

Taking account of this diversity, we are interested in what you consider to be different or special about college-based HE provision, especially where similar or equivalent courses are offered by HE institutions. This will probably mean some generalisation on your part, although we hope you will point to specific features or examples as appropriate.

We have kept the number of our questions to a minimum and they are sufficiently open-ended, we think, to allow for discursive responses (and, if necessary, to challenge assumptions in the questions).

Most of our questions are framed in terms of two categories of higher education:

- prescribed higher education: courses and qualifications funded directly or indirectly by the HEFCE (such as first degrees, FDs, HNDs, HNCs, DipHEs)
- non-prescribed higher education: courses and qualifications funded by the LSC or others (such as higher-level vocational and professional qualifications, including NVQs at Levels 4 and 5).

Please complete the questionnaire and e-mail it back to lscproject@sheffield.ac.uk as soon as possible, but by 28 March at the latest.

All replies will be treated in confidence. Your college will be listed as having made a contribution to the research but nothing will be directly attributed to you or your institution in the research report. We expect this report to be published and to be sent to you in return for your help.
About you and your college

1. What is your name, position, and postal and e-mail address at the college?

2. What is the size of the total prescribed HE (whether directly or indirectly funded) in your college (please tick)?
   - under 100 FTEs □
   - 101 to 300 FTEs □
   - 301 to 450 FTEs □
   - over 450 FTEs □

3. Please, if you can, give us an indication of the scale (approximate FTEs) and scope (kinds of courses and qualifications) of the non-prescribed HE level work in your college?

About your prescribed HE

4. When comparing your prescribed HE with similar or equivalent provision in HEIs, how important are the following aspects in making your prescribed HE different or distinctive?
   These headings are just prompts. You might wish to write something or nothing under each heading, as well as use the ‘other’ heading to capture alternative or summary views.
   - the accessibility of the institution and its courses
   - the nature and range of programmes
   - the work and conditions of staff
   - the profile and needs of students
   - the nature and style of teaching
   - the character and quality of learning
   - the outcomes and standards achieved
   - the resources and facilities provided
   - the opportunities for progression and employment
   - other

5. Which of these do you consider most important and why?

6. Within your prescribed HE, does direct or indirect funding make any difference to the nature of the student experience?

7. In general, would you say that your prescribed HE is more like provision in an HEI or more like FE provision in your institution?

About your non-prescribed HE

8. When comparing your non-prescribed HE with similar or equivalent provision in HEIs, how important are the following aspects in making your non-prescribed HE different or distinctive?
   These headings are just prompts. You might wish to write something or nothing under each heading, as well as use the ‘other’ heading to capture alternative or summary views.
   - the accessibility of the institution and its courses
   - the nature and range of programmes
   - the work and conditions of staff
   - the profile and needs of students
   - the nature and style of teaching
   - the character and quality of learning
   - the outcomes and standards achieved
   - the resources and facilities provided
   - the opportunities for progression and employment
   - other

9. Which of these do you consider most important and why?

10. In general, would you say that your non-prescribed HE is more like provision in an HEI or more like FE provision in your institution?

Your overall conclusions

11. Do you think the distinction between FE level and HE level work in your institution is
   - generally straightforward and agreed □
   - generally problematic and contested □
   - if you think it is generally problematic, please say how and why

12. In light of the 2003 White Paper on higher education, are there any other comments or reflections you wish to make about the nature of HE in FE?

Thank you for participating.
Please now e-mail this questionnaire to lscproject@sheffield.ac.uk
Appendix 4
Case studies and methods

Nine case studies were undertaken in pairs of HE and FE institutions, focusing on particular courses where there was comparable HE provision. In each of the 18 institutions interviews were conducted with course leaders and, in 15 out of the 18 institutions, focus groups were undertaken with students. In the other three institutions we were not able to meet with students due to the timetabling of revision and examination sessions.

The case studies provide reflections upon their current HE experiences by two contrasting groups of participants, students and staff within HEIs and FECs, within a limited number of institutional contexts.

The case studies were chosen to reflect the range of higher education available within FECs and to illustrate the nature of variations in links between the partner institutions. They cover a range of levels of study from foundation year to postgraduate provision, including undergraduate degree courses, part-time and full-time HNDs, Year 0 provision, a nationally recognised professional course for teachers of English to speakers of other languages (TESOL); and an in-service postgraduate certificate in education.

The majority of the paired courses were part of franchised arrangements and involved a range of links from small, single-subject partnerships to consortia involving 2000+ students in many colleges and leading to a range of qualifications. The Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) qualification was delivered independently by a college and a university.
College staff delivered the HE courses in all the FECs, except where peripatetic university staff delivered an evening degree programme. Institutions ranged from half a mile to 80+ miles apart. Higher education provision within colleges varied between 9 and 185 FTEs. Course recruitment ranged from 6 to 150+. In one college, the case study course was the only HE course. In another, there were many such programmes and a separate HE prospectus was produced. The profiles of students on these courses were varied and included several where young students predominated.

The nine case studies generated data from 18 differing institutional contexts, and included key course variables such as subject, size, level and mode. As they were chosen primarily to enable a comparison between identical or similar courses in the two sectors this inevitably necessitated a reliance upon post-1992 HEIs. Very few pre-1992 universities offer both a franchised course in a FEC and the same course taught in-house, and none was identified as willing to participate in the study.

The case study institutions

College and University A
HND Business IT, franchised

College and University B
TESOL, Trinity College, full-time and part-time, non-prescribed

College and University C
Foundation year, full-time, franchised

College and University D
Combined studies degree, full-time, franchised

College and University E
HND Computing, full-time, franchised

College and University F
HND/BA Business Studies, part-time, franchised

College and University G
BA Business Studies, full-time, franchised

College and University H
In-service Postgraduate Certificate in Education, part-time, consortia

College and University I
HND Computing, full-time, franchised

Questionnaires and interviews with course leaders

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with course leaders in HEIs and FECs, covering key aspects of the delivery of higher education in the two contexts. Prior to an interview, a brief questionnaire was forwarded, requesting information on course characteristics, student numbers, course organisation and the role of further education in the current expansion of student numbers.

These two research instruments were designed to elicit, in some depth, perceptions concerning the similarities and differences between higher education delivered in the context of FECs and that offered in the context of HEIs.

The questionnaire and interview schedule are set out below.
Questionnaire for course leaders in FECs

Purpose of the visit
This project is concerned with the range of factors that characterise the nature of higher education when it is delivered in further education colleges. It is designed to develop a deeper understanding of widening participation initiatives and the expansion of higher education provision. The inquiry includes a number of case studies looking at how similar programmes are delivered in both higher education institutions and further education colleges. This part of the study is intended to:

- clarify in what ways, if any, HE in FE is distinctive
- establish the parameters and contexts that define distinctiveness in relation to comparable provision within HE institutions
- document the ways in which FE institutions distinguish between their FE and HE provision.

How you can help
As part of our case study programme we would like to ensure that course leaders themselves have an opportunity to contribute their own views and experiences. We are especially interested in your perceptions of course organisation, delivery and the working of partnership arrangements with HEI colleagues.

For this purpose we have developed an interview schedule designed to facilitate semi-structured discussion around a number of principal themes. This will enable consistency across all the case study institutions involved. Each interview will take no more than one hour and will be conducted by one of the researchers directly responsible for the report to the LSDA. The themes are listed below.

In advance of the interview it would be very helpful if you could also assist us by providing some contextual information about the course in question. We require only limited information that we hope will be easily and quickly compiled before our visit. This may be e-mailed to us beforehand at the address indicated at the foot of the page or simply handed to the interviewer on the day of the visit. These preliminary questions are listed below.

Please be assured that participating individuals and institutions will not be identified by name in any reports or publication arising from the study.

We do realise the many demands and pressures on course leaders and would like to thank you in advance for your willingness to take the time to participate in this study.
Preliminary information from FE course leader

1 Please give brief details about the following aspects of the HE course for which you are responsible:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course title:</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjects/main areas available and levels:</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Validating institution/awarding body:</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modes of delivery (for example, part-time, online):</th>
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<tr>
<th>Student progression arrangements (if relevant):</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course fees: Full-time:</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part-time:</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2 Current student numbers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Full-time</th>
<th>Part-time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 4+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (FTE)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3 Duration of your involvement in the delivery of HE provision in this college (please ring the appropriate number):

- Less than one year  1
- One to two years  2
- Three years or more  3

4 What are the current class sizes?

5 What are the normal class/teacher contact hours for full-time and/or part-time students?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Full-time:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part-time:</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Invitation to comment (optional):</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

6 What do you feel is the particular role of FE in the current expansion of HE recruitment?

7 Do you think HE and FE offer complementary or competitive provision?

8 How do you think differential undergraduate fees (proposed for 2006) will impact on your course?

9 Why do students choose to study on this course? What is it about an FE setting that appeals to them?

10 Are there any particular and important ways in which teaching and learning on an HE level course differs from that on feeder FE courses?

11 Other comments (continue on a separate sheet if necessary)

Please email your response to — in advance of the interview. Alternatively, you may complete the form and hand it to the interviewer on the day of your meeting.
Questionnaire for course leaders in HEIs

Purpose of the visit

This project is concerned with the range of factors that characterise the nature of higher education when it is delivered in both further education colleges and higher education institutions. It is designed to develop a deeper understanding of widening participation initiatives and the expansion of higher education provision. The inquiry includes a number of case studies looking at how similar programmes are delivered in both higher education institutions and further education colleges. This part of the study is intended to:

■ clarify in what ways, if any, HE delivered in FE and in HEIs is distinctive
■ establish the parameters and contexts that define distinctiveness in relation to comparable provision within the two types of institutions.

How you can help

As part of our case study programme we would like to ensure that course leaders themselves have an opportunity to contribute their own views and experiences. We are especially interested in your perceptions of course organisation, delivery and the working of partnership arrangements with FE colleagues.

For this purpose we have developed an interview schedule designed to facilitate semi-structured discussion around a number of principal themes. This will enable consistency across all the case study institutions involved. Each interview will take no more than one hour and will be conducted by one of the researchers directly responsible for the report to the LSDA. The themes are listed below.

In advance of the interview it would be very helpful if you could also assist us by providing some contextual information about the course in question. We require only limited information that we hope will be easily and quickly compiled before our visit. This may be e-mailed to us beforehand at the address indicated at the foot of the page or simply handed to the interviewer on the day of the visit. These preliminary questions are listed below.

Please be assured that participating individuals and institutions will not be identified by name in any reports or publication arising from the study.

We do realise the many demands and pressures on course leaders and would like to thank you in advance for your willingness to take time to participate in this study.
Preliminary information from HE course leader

1 Please give brief details about the following aspects of the HE course for which you are responsible (as delivered in this HEI only):

   Course title: ________________________________
   Subjects available and levels: ________________________________
   Modes of delivery (for example, part-time, online): ________________________________

   Course fees: Full-time: ________________________________
   Part-time: ________________________________

2 Current student numbers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Full-time</th>
<th>Part-time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 4+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (FTE)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3 For how long have you been a course leader?

   One to two years  2
   Three years or more  3

4 What are the current class sizes, including lecture and seminar/tutorial groups?

5 What are the normal class/teacher contact hours for full-time and/or part-time students?

   Full-time: ________________________________
   Part-time: ________________________________

   Invitation to comment (optional):

   ________________________________

6 What do you feel is the particular role of FE in the current expansion of HE recruitment?

7 Do you think HE and FE offer complementary or competitive provision?

8 How do you think differential undergraduate fees (proposed for 2006) will impact on your course?

9 Why do students choose to study on this course? What is it about this HEI that appeals to them?

10 Other comments

   Please email your response to — in advance of the interview. Alternatively you may complete the form and hand it to the interviewer on the day of your meeting.
Schedule of themes and issues for interviews with course leaders in FECs

1 Teaching issues
- Arrangements for selection of college tutors contributing to HE course delivery
- Scope and scale of tutor contact with students
- Size and experience of core teaching team
- Liaison with HEI colleagues

2 Student recruitment and retention
- Arrangements and responsibilities for recruiting students
- Interpreting ‘normal’ academic requirements for course entry
- Catchment areas and profile of typical student intake
- Specific obstacles to student recruitment
- Issues relating to retention of students
- Differences (if any) between full-time/ part-time routes
- Progression to further study in partner HEI

3 The learning environment
- Class sizes
- Modes of delivery
- Demands on student support systems from HE students (differences, if any, from FE student needs)

4 Curriculum
- FEC involvement in design of the HE curriculum
- Role and liaison of external bodies including the HEI
- Vocational elements to the curriculum
- Involvement of employers (if any) in curriculum development
- Range of options available to students

5 Facilities and resources
- Adequacy of teaching spaces and facilities
- Student access to HEI libraries or other facilities
- In-house learning resources, including library provision, IT, equipment, laboratories
- Technical support

6 General comments
Any further comments, elaboration, relating to the distinctiveness of the delivery of HE in FE and to factors which distinguish FE from HE level teaching and learning?
Schedule of themes and issues for interviews with course leaders in HEIs

1 Teaching issues
   ■ Scope and scale of tutor contact with students
   ■ Size and experience of core teaching team
   ■ Expectations concerning staff research time and output
   ■ Liaison with FE colleagues

2 Student recruitment and retention
   ■ Arrangements and responsibilities for recruiting students
   ■ Interpreting ‘normal’ academic requirements for course entry
   ■ Application/acceptance ratios
   ■ Catchment areas and profile of typical student intake
   ■ Specific obstacles to student recruitment
   ■ Issues relating to retention of students
   ■ Differences (if any) between full-time/part-time routes
   ■ Progression of FE students to HE

3 The learning environment
   ■ Class sizes
   ■ Modes of delivery
   ■ Nature of student support systems
   ■ Provision and use of study skills support

4 Curriculum
   ■ Vocational elements in the curriculum
   ■ Involvement of employers (if any) in curriculum development
   ■ Range of options available to students
   ■ Curriculum monitoring/quality procedures in FE

5 Facilities and resources
   ■ Adequacy of teaching spaces and facilities
   ■ In-house learning resources, including library provision, IT, equipment, laboratories
   ■ Technical support

6 General comments
   Any further comments, elaboration, relating to the distinctiveness of the delivery of HE in FE compared to HEIs?
Focus groups with students

All course leaders were asked to provide access to a group of students who would participate in a focus group discussion of their HE experiences. All but three were able to do so. The invitation to participate was passed to students via the course leader and the number who responded depended on the vagaries of timetabling, assessment deadlines and the complexities of student lives. The size of the groups varied from two (both overseas students) to 37. The majority comprised between six and nine students.

The focus group participants completed a brief data sheet asking for some basic information:

Male/female:

Age:

Would you regard yourself as local to this area? Yes No

Why did you choose this institution?

Was this your first choice institution in which to undertake HE study? Yes No

Personal comments:

A total of 142 students participated in the focus groups (66 from FECs and 76 from HEIs), covering all the courses with differing modes and levels in both FECs and HEIs. All participants completed the student data sheet and about a third chose to add personal reflections.

A total of 59 (out of 66) college students regarded themselves as local compared to 43 (out of 76) university respondents. For 56 college students this was their first choice institution, as it was for 52 university students.

The students were not selected as a representative sample of their course intake. Hence no claims are made concerning the generalisability of their views other than that they illustrate the range from across a variety of courses and provide insights into the similarities and differences across sectors, modes and levels of study.

The format of the focus group activity had to be modified depending upon the group size. The majority (12 of the 15 groups) took the form of a metaplanning approach, designed to facilitate the aggregation and categorisation of the views expressed, by the students themselves rather than by the researcher. This approach involved the following steps. After a brief introduction by the researcher on the purposes of the research and the planned expansion of HE, particularly in FE colleges, all groups participated in a discussion of around 40–60 minutes on two themes:

- What makes your HE experience really worthwhile and to be recommended to others who may not have thought about it?
- What aspects of your HE experience are problematic as a model for the expansion of HE?

For each of these questions the students individually wrote up to four responses based on their own perceptions and experience of HE: four worthwhile features and four problematic aspects. These were then discussed collectively and categorised by the group into different types of response so that the range of feelings and perceptions could be represented on a large sheet of paper. Each student was then given three stickers to indicate the importance of each category. A group discussion then summarised the agreements and disagreements represented, and extra comments were noted. The sheets therefore encapsulated both the range of views and the strength of feeling about differing aspects of their HE experience.

In three of the focus groups it was not possible to follow this format and a more conventional focus group approach was used, posing the same two basic questions and exploring the complexities of the responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age profile</th>
<th>College students</th>
<th>University students (3 missing)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;21</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21–25</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26–30</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30+</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>