Laying Further Foundations: A group of teaching assistants reflect on their Foundation Degree studies at a Further Education College

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This study forms part of the IfL’s Practitioner Research Programme which aims to develop research practice in further education. It was conducted at a further education college in the East Midlands, which delivers a range of Foundation Degree courses that are validated at a nearby University. It aims to explore students’ decision making and their student experience. It offers some insight into students’ views and suggests further opportunities for practitioner research.

Since the late 1990s there have been government aspirations to widen participation in higher education in England, and in particular, a drive for higher education institutions (HEIs) such as universities to engage with a more diverse student population including those who traditionally, have not applied for university (Abramson 1996). The English further education colleges (FECs), with their history of diversification have been integral to the implementation of a higher education strategy aimed at widening participation, through the delivery of higher education qualifications in further education settings (HE in FE) (Parry 2012:42).

The University co-ordinates a distributed offer of HE in FE through collaborative partnerships with a number of local FECs. As the University and its partner FECs seek ways to develop, diversify and distribute their course offer, there has been some informal, internal speculation at both the partner FECs and the University, about the type of educational experience HE in FE students expect. In order to design and market effectively, a sustainable and useful range of HE courses in FE colleges, both parties in the partnership need to build up an authentic impression of the types of learners such courses attract, and to appreciate that the opportunity to study in the students’ own locality often forms only part of the courses’ appeal. The study is interested therefore in finding out how/why students choose to enrol on HE courses at FE settings, whether their expectations are (broadly) met, and gain some insight into their experiences as HE students in a predominantly FE environment.

As stated by Morris (2003:4):

‘Teaching teams need to understand their client groups, how to recruit and motivate them. Institutions need to understand how their curriculum offer matches needs in their communities, such as the demand for workplace skills, for community development and for progression from school.’

This study focuses on the experiences of a small group of students at one FEC (“the College”), and explores their decision to study HE in FE. In order to better understand the needs and expectations of HE in FE students at the College, the students’ motivations for choosing HE in FE and their satisfaction with their experience of studying for higher education qualification in a further education environment are explored. Using a focus group method to explore students’ perceptions of themselves as learners and their teaching and learning experience, the study identifies some positive aspects of the HE in FE experience that might offset perceived disadvantages. First, to develop a conceptual framework for the study, the policy and practical context of HE in FE will be discussed with reference to literature.
According to Parry (2009:333) reforms instigated by the New Labour government broke the pattern of demand for HE, with education policies that according to Hillier and Jameson (2003:17), were driven by principles of social inclusion. Allen and Ainley (2007:71) explain that the changes in the employment market over the 1990s, with the decline in manufacturing industries precipitated New Labour’s pursuit of academic qualifications as a means to develop human capital. Discourses of human capital, as noted by Dunne et al (2008:240) originated in the 1970s, but have gained currency since New Labour came into government in 1997. In a post-industrial economy, the concept of a job for life was replaced by that of lifelong learning in which higher levels of education with regular up-skilling would be necessary. As explained by Taylor (2012:7), in 1997, the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (the ‘Dearing Report’) emphasised the need to develop HE qualifications, particularly at sub-degree level, to increase availability and accessibility of HE, so enabling it to appeal to a wider audience, to develop human capital.

Scott (2009:409) reports that as HEIs have tended to focus growth on full-time undergraduates and the post-graduate market, FECs that are, according to Scott (2009:410), accustomed to working in a challenging market, have busily engaged with the diverse margins of the student population. Sub-degree level HE qualifications have increasingly been devolved to and established as being the domain of FECs, allowing HEIs to focus growth on their traditional market. FECs therefore have a central role in widening participation to HE, their resident FE learners providing fertile ground for the growth of sub-degree level HE qualifications within local communities. The primary example is the Foundation Degree (FD), which Dunne et al (2008:240) explain, aims to make HE ‘more affordable, accessible and appealing to a wider range of people.’

FDs, which were introduced in 2001 as an intermediate, sub-degree level HE qualification (Taylor, 2012:7) are placed at Level 5 on the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and carry 240 credit accumulation transfer (CATS) points. They are equivalent to the first two years of a bachelor’s degree. The FD forms part of a raft of measures aimed at increasing participation in HE and the general development of vocational education. Taylor (2012:11) summarises the dual function of FDs, as both a timely response to skills and knowledge needs in industry, and a means of entry to HE through a vocational, work-based route, thus contributing to widening participation. As such, the distinguishing features of the FD are the integration of academic learning with work-based learning and its flexible modes of delivery, enabling people to earn and learn (Dunne et al, 2008:240). FDs therefore target a marginal audience which is vocationally-orientated rather than purely academic. Frequently this includes those already in employment who seek a work-based route into higher education.

FECs are integral to and very familiar with education’s broader employer-engagement agenda. Scott (2009:410) suggests that FECs are more open than HEIs to the concept of employer engagement, already having relationships with industry through, for example, apprenticeships and day-release training courses. Not all HEIs devolve their sub-degree portfolio, with many successfully delivering FDs on their own
campuses (Scott, 2009), either singly or concurrently with local FECs. Nevertheless, as suggested by Hartley and Groves (2011), it might still be argued that FECs, with their history of employer engagement and other sub-degree qualifications such as the Higher National Diploma (HND) offer a natural home to the FD.

FECs do not generally award qualifications independently (Parry, 2012:36) and FDs need to be validated by an HEI. This is achieved through collaborative partnerships between HEIs and FECs in which the HEI retains control of awarding powers and monitors the academic standards of the HE programme, which is delivered by the FEC. At the College in this study, three FDs are validated in this manner by the University.

The role of such partnerships between HE and FE institutions, notes Parry (2009:335) is to vouchsafe the quality of an HE programme by keeping it under the control and scrutiny of the HEI. Hartley and Groves (2011:7) suggest that in such partnerships, FECs tend to be the ‘junior partners.’ Just over half of FD students in England progress to the final year of a bachelor’s degree (HEFCE 2008, cited in Parry 2009). Commonly this takes place at the parent HEI (Parry 2009:339), thus feeding-in to the HEI’s student population. For the FEC, the advantage of partnership is frequently one of student retention. As stated by Abramson (1996) the FE sector has long been perceived by HEIs as having responsibility for the learning needs of the local community. A working partnership between FEC and HEI promotes ‘additional rungs on the learning ladder’ (p.12) to promote a ‘seamless robe’ in which FE students can progress in their academic career within the same institution (Pickles 1996:100) which may be attractive to students. Abramson (1996: 10) suggests collaborative arrangements between FECs and HEIs facilitate the HEIs ability to bring their product closer to the consumer. This could perhaps be seen in the case of a foundation degree, to be closer in terms of what is wanted, in socio-cultural and vocational terms as well geographically. HEFCE (2009:139,140) confirms that students taking HE courses in FE colleges are more likely to be mature (over 25), and come from areas of low participation, with few having any family tradition of HE.

Scott (2009:412) cautions that the demand for sub-degree courses is ‘fragile’ and that demand for a traditional, academic university experience has been sustained by HEIs, in preference to the more vocational routes. This, he suggests, typifies the essentially English notion of what ‘university’ means and looks like. He notes that there remain in England, ‘important social groups reluctant to access higher education even in the most inclusive post 1992 university’ (p.417).

On the other hand, Taylor (2012:10) suggests that this is changing: ‘different forms of knowledge have gained legitimacy in a range of academic, work-based, professional and personal contexts’, deconstructing traditional institutional boundaries and paving the way for new perceptions of ‘university education’ and what it may entail. Against this backdrop discourses arise about the nature of the HE in FE student, their expectations and needs. From the literature review, HE in FE students appear to be positioned on the margins of the HE student population, in terms of age, socio-economic background and academic confidence.
This marginal group has particular needs. Writing in 1991, Smith and Saunders (1991:68) commented that half of all school leavers did so at the age of 16. They observed that this group of learners were seen to be unprepared for the demands of HE, should they require it in later years. This is relevant to the FD market, as it is likely that today’s FD cohorts include some mature students who left school at age 16. Smith and Saunders (1991) suggest that teaching professionals working with this client group ‘need to understand some of the complex meanings and outcomes of previous educational experiences’ (p.69) that students carry with them into the classroom, in order to remedy the deficit in academic skill brought about by an early departure from formal education (p.68).

Burton et al (2011) discuss the dispositional barriers experienced by some HE in FE students, who arrive at college with little understanding of the nature of HE and its demands. Scott (2009) suggests that: ‘marginal students tend to find HE more of a challenge than “traditional” students.’ Golding-Lloyd and Griffiths (2008:16) agree, stating: ‘it can be argued that students studying for higher education programmes in a further education college require more support than might be supposed.’ HEFCE (2009:140) confirms this, reporting that HE in FE course co-ordinators identified that many students need input on study skills. In contrast, more recent research by Parry et al (2012) found that today’s FEC managers are largely unaccepting of this stereotypical deficit model of HE in FE students, and generally unwilling to acknowledge the presence of academically weak students in their HE cohorts as a particular problem.

As shown by Bird (1996:25) students have reported that they preferred the HE in FE experience and tended to be of the view that the benefits of an FEC setting are worth the trade-off of certain elements of HEIs. Students favour what they believe to be smaller group sizes and more accessible teaching staff. The more intimate teacher: learner dyad that is a feature of FE offers possibilities for those bruised by past, negative educational experiences to re-engage with education, which Scott (2009:417) suggests might be unavailable, or at least more difficult to offer, in mass universities.

Parry et al (2012:103), suggest that the advantages of HE in FE are implied in policy discourses in terms of the colleges’ accessibility, flexibility, the learning experience and costs, as well as promoting widening participation in HE amongst resistant social groups. However, they found that students’ decisions to study HE in FE were not particularly discerning. The researchers report that, ‘there was no dominant most important reason for selecting a college over a university’ (Parry et al, 2012:103), although ‘localism’ was a pervasive theme (p.184), so that the students’ choices were largely constrained by inability or unwillingness to go elsewhere.

Such constructs of HE in FE students fit neatly with the concept of widening participation, as it aims to improve access for hard-to-reach, non-traditional student markets. The national map of student participation displayed on the HEFCE website [HEFCE 2012] shows an area of low participation along the east of England, from below the Humber, running around the Wash. This is the area served by the University’s
partner colleges, placing them geographically in a potentially high-market area for attracting non-traditional HE students.

In these times of competition and demand-led marketisation in education, the idea that students might only present at an institution because they have few options to go elsewhere is somewhat disconcerting, and gives rise to some questions about the University’s devolved HE audience at its partner FECs. Are they making an informed decision or taking “Hobson’s Choice”? The approach to this investigation in seeking answers to this question is qualitative. Quantitative data such as numbers of students, age, sex and length of journeys travelled to the College can provide certain objective facts. However, as Holliday (2007:6) suggests, qualitative research takes the view that people are ‘mysterious’ and research can only attempt to make sense of their behaviour. The study therefore follows an interpretive rather than positivist paradigm, as it looks for reasons behind students’ decision making, perhaps going beyond the obvious locational factors.

Data gathering method

The chosen data gathering tool was a small focus group of HE in FE students at the College. Justification for this method is both pragmatic and epistemological. This is a small scale study in which time is of the essence. Focus groups enable the researcher to come into contact with multiple participants in one encounter, which brings together different viewpoints and spotlights shared views amongst the group. Denscombe (2010:177) shows that a focus group brings a small group of people together to explore ‘attitudes and perceptions, feelings and ideas about a specific topic.’ The distinction of a focus group is that a topic is presented for discussion, not between the participant and the researcher, but amongst the participants themselves. Social interaction is used as a means of eliciting information, in which the researcher facilitates rather than leads the discussion. The social exchange that occurs in a focus group can allow a depth of data to be generated, which would be difficult to achieve within the sterility of a questionnaire or survey method, but without the heavy investment of time (in both execution and analysis) that is demanded by interviews.

As a tool, a focus group has some risks. The researcher is responsible for maintaining the focus of the discussion without over-direction. Unintentional clues, for example the use of somewhat rhetorical questioning can taint the objectivity of the data and render it unreliable. As discussion may well lead to consensus, focus groups tend to yield a ‘collective rather than individual view’ (Cohen, Manion et al, 2011:436). The discussion generated is a unique exchange amongst those present and therefore not necessarily generalisable across the wider student population.

Sample group
The focus group of seven volunteers was drawn from the second year class of teaching assistants following the FD in Applied Studies, Learning Support. The FD is not a requirement for teaching assistants, but it provides a professional development and progression route for those working at any level, who wish (and are able) to take advantage of it. As discussed by Dunne et al (2008) New Labour’s workforce remodelling strategy in schools relied heavily on the up-skilling of teaching assistants and an attempt to professionalise their role. Some use the FD as a first step toward becoming a qualified teacher or to develop specialist understanding in key aspects of their role, such as leadership and inclusion (Dunne et al, 2008). As someone experienced in the research process, the participants’ regular tutor would be a gatekeeper, who could protect the students’ interests and clarify their position as research participants. Following the guidance of Krueger (1998), three questions were prepared to stimulate the focus group conversation:

1. What did you consider when deciding to undertake a foundation degree?
2. What do you think the advantages are of studying here at NCS?
3. Do you think there are any disadvantages to studying for your degree at a further education college?

Ethics

Due consideration to ethics included the needs of both institutions. The University’s Ethics Code of Practice (based on the BERA Code, BERA online, 2012) was followed, embracing student anonymity, informed consent and confidential storage of data including recordings. The focus group was arranged to avoid impingement on teaching and learning time. Participants had sight of questions in advance. Ethics approval was gained from the Institute for Learning and ethical issues were further clarified with the University and the College.

The issue of power was troublesome, as the participants associated the study with the University, to which some wish to progress next year. This might inhibit or colour their responses. It was observed on a previous visit to the FD classroom at the College, that students spoke to University representatives more freely when their own tutors were present. It seemed that a college tutor in this situation provided a form of secure anchor for the students. Through consultation, the college tutor agreed to assume the role of moderator at the focus group, with the aim of enabling participants to speak more candidly than perhaps they would have done in an unfamiliar situation. This moderation role is not without some risks (e.g. subjectivity of opinion) however it is thought that this approach has more advantages than it does disadvantages. In particular the College team had some level of control in the conduct of the study and the tutor was active in the research rather than merely being on the periphery of it. Acting as an enabler to the students empowered the tutor to participate in research activity whilst preserving the teacher:student dyad.
Conduct and Findings

The participants were encouraged to reflect upon their choice of institution, what factors had influenced their choices and specifically, whether the opportunity to study HE in FE had held particular appeal. The group’s interactions were recorded on video. The focus group was analysed using basic, manual coding to identify emerging themes.

Most participants cited radio advertisements and word-of-mouth as ways they had heard about the HE provision at the College. One had heard about it from the University. Within the discussion, the group showed general satisfaction with their course and institution. Most participants expressed clear goal-orientation, with the desire to progress to a full bachelor’s degree, and about half wanting eventually to become teachers. The focus group discussion fell into two broad areas: the perceived benefits of the FD itself, and their experience of studying for it at the College. The discussion included the assumed differences between the College and an HEI and there was some brief discussion of their plans for progression to the parent HEI next year.

In terms of the FD, all participants felt that it offered the most practical way for them to enter HE whilst remaining in employment. They were pleased that the FD recognises their status as work-based learners and felt that the course had successfully synthesised academic study with their day to day professional role. All appeared to be clear about the status of the FD qualification, and generally comfortable with their choice of course.

Turning to the decision to study HE in FE, echoing Parry et al’s (2012) findings, the most common driver was the geographical location of the College or the relative travelling distance from the participants’ homes. This was particularly important for some with children, who felt they could not justify the additional travelling time to the University, in that this would have distanced them further from their children and extended unnecessarily, the time they spent away from the family. Some said they had opted not to go to full time university because the distance from home led to extra travelling expenses, or they did not want to live away from home which would result in lost wages and higher living costs. The balance of work, family life and study was the main priority for all the participants, with financial considerations emerging as a common theme.

Moving away from the more logistical matters, to the teaching and learning experience, participants revealed that their option for HE in FE included some qualitative judgement. They were aware of both the College’s local reputation and that of the parent University.

“Originally I came to an open day at [the University], before I even thought of doing it here. I thought when I heard about doing it here, that location-wise it’s perfect for me, but I was concerned, originally. I thought,
really I would prefer to go to [the University], because of the reputation ...but when I heard that it was validated here, that was the best way."

“I knew about [the University] before I knew you could do it here”

“[The University] was my first choice, but I missed the date for application. It was a bit later here.”

There was some comparison between the University, the College and other institutions such as the Open University. One participant had re-started the FD after a disappointing experience elsewhere, with a different HEI.

With one exception, the group said they had felt somewhat daunted at the prospect of starting HE and that being able to study locally at a FEC had probably been less intimidating for them than entering an HEI. Participants were able to identify a range of benefits to studying HE in FE. This tended to relate to how they saw themselves as learners. For example:

“I’ve never been to university or anything and I didn’t go through the whole college or the 6th form process, so to me, it was quite a big step to say, go straight to university. So this felt like …I was a bit more ready to come here …the first tiny step before the next, great big step”

“It was a bit like dipping your toe in the water, to see if what you thought it was going to be was actually what it was, and it allows you to progress at a rate which is really stable and comfortable, and still you’ve got that goal at the end …it was a route that was a positive thing all round really.”

“Initially, it was the whole ‘degree level’… you know, the ‘degree level’, it’s just so frightening… how difficult is it going to be compared to the study we’ve done before? Whereas now, because we’ve done this, whatever we do next year, it won’t be as bad.”

“It respected where I was as a learner”

They compared their experiences of studying at the College with likely part-time or distance learning alternatives, such as the Open University, and agreed that a live teaching experience was very important to them, as were opportunities to share learning and support one another. They believed that the teaching they have received at the College is of a good standard and were very satisfied with the amount of contact time and level of student support, which they believed were greater than at an HEI.

“I would expect to get less help at a University”

One learner with some experience of HE commented that the support from tutors at the College is far greater than previously experienced:

“It’s a bonus, here, that’s for sure.”
Most saw the choice of HE in FE as a distinctly positive one. There were only two problematic areas for the group. Access to library resources was limited both by library stock and the opening hours. There was some feeling that there was insufficient variety in the college library, that the texts were not academic enough, although they agreed that the library had made efforts to improve this, for example by the development of its e-book stock. The general feeling in the focus group was that they have “got by.” The second point identified by participants was the lack of designated space for mature learners (rather than HE learners, in particular) to have peace and quiet.

“We have time for independent study, and we can’t find anywhere to do it, there are groups of young students chatting... or music from the gym.”

They were keen to clarify that they saw this as having more to do with the average age of the FE students at the college than their level of study. One student stressed that while they do not expect to be made a priority, they would have liked some social space for mature learners. However, generally the participants’ attitude was accepting of the environment:

“It’s a college, so there are going to be younger ones around.”

“It’s a bit of a pay-off, I suppose, not having those facilities.”

“We wouldn’t want to change it too much, because then obviously, it’s not what we’ve come here for.”

The relationship with the University was seen to be an important factor, by the focus group participants. Although this had not necessarily guided their choices, it had reassured them and helped them to feel they were engaged in a robust and secure course that is validated by an HEI with a strong reputation. Some commented that their friends, family and colleagues have a lowered expectation or perception of the course demands, because it is delivered at an FE college:

“You have to justify it. They’ll say, “That’s not a University” and I have to explain, about the validation, and justify it.”

“There is a little bit of snobbery I think, between the teachers who have been full time university and done the full four years to gain their degree, and those how have done this route.”

The overall impression from the focus group is that the participants have found HE in FE to be a positive experience, they are happy with the decision they made and feel it has equipped them well for potential progression to level 6 at the University next year.

Finally, the focus group gave an indication of the role played by this particular FD at the College in widening participation. Three of the group indicated that nobody in their family had attended any form of HE before. Those whose relatives had attended then indicated that these were siblings or offspring rather than parents,
supporting the literature’s suggestion that there is less of an established family tradition of University study amongst HE in FE students. For some, the College had provided a back-up option when plans elsewhere had fallen through or proved unsatisfactory, but most said they had no back-up plan and that had the course been unavailable at the College, they did not know what else they might have done. One student summarised this:

“I couldn’t have afforded to go to full time study, and I don’t think I was ready to go into a University situation, and travel that distance. So for me, no, this was my one shot, my only one.”

In conclusion, the study allowed the participants to reflect on and voice their views and feelings about HE in FE, the choices available to them and their student experience. All the students seemed satisfied with their choice and course, and some indicated that the College had provided an accessible educational route, which had proved difficult to find elsewhere. The logistical matters of travel, time and expense were dominant factors in their choice. Some qualitative judgements had been used, however. The students had considered the quality of the College and were attracted by the University’s validation of their course. They were keen to emphasise their feelings of safety and security in the FE environment, some feeling unready for university at the time of enrolment. Terms such as ‘an official university’, ‘a whole university’ or ‘a real university’ were used to draw a distinction. Their assumptions about this reflected some unawareness of the reality of university life, but the main point emerging is that they are satisfied at the College and do not feel that there is anything in their student experience that would benefit from radical change. For many, the opportunity has provided a stepping stone, without which they would not have felt able to enter the world of HE.

From this it can be seen that as suggested in the literature review, HE at the College does fill a particular need for a particular type of student in terms of academic and social confidence, but equally, it provides a practical solution for relatively confident students who need a local, accessible option.

Limitations of the study

Cohen, Manion et al (2011:437) assert that an essential element in using a focus group is the sampling strategy, and this is echoed by Verma and Mallik (1999:113) who warn that an unrepresentative sample risks biased data. Here I offer a critical reflection on the drawbacks of my chosen method and sampling strategy.

Aiming to minimise intrusion into the students’ college day, I sought volunteers rather than using a randomised sample. However, on reflection, it is acknowledged that the data may well be coloured by the shared perceptions and understandings of a self-selected sample group (Punch 1998: 105). Whilst random selection does not eliminate this risk, it might improve the validity of the focus group data, in terms of its
ability to represent the whole class. A larger study might have scope for the inclusion of biographical details of the focus group participants. Within the constraints of a very small study, this omission weakens the overall impression gained of the participants and their ability, if any, to represent their classmates.

In a future study of this type, triangulation of data through a range of methods for example questionnaires and individual participant interviews would strengthen the study’s methodology, ethics and reliability of findings.

Conclusion

This exercise has been valuable in enabling some students to share their experiences and to help the course providers at both HE and FE level to develop an understanding of the characteristics of this particular client group. Bearing out the findings of previous research, it can be seen that this group of HE in FE learners do display some particular needs in terms of domestic responsibilities and financial needs, and in some cases, their personal insecurities about university study. On reflection, Hartley and Groves’ (2011) remarks about the subordinate positioning of FECs in collaborative partnerships with HEIs are quite potent. Most FECs delivering HE (such as the College in this study) are somewhat dependent upon partner HEIs in academic terms, in that they are unable to award their own FDs, but are they stronger in other ways? In this study, it emerged that this group of learners whilst certainly seeking a credible HE course and qualification, also found at the College a particular kind of nurturing teaching which they believed to be less available in mainstream HE settings. Certainly, in this regard, they seem to be very satisfied with the support and guidance they have received at the College. Contrasting this finding with the comments of college principals in Parry et al (2012) it may be that HE in FE tutors at the College are quietly specialising in this nurturing style of HE delivery, and thereby offering something which whilst not unique in HE, is nevertheless appealing to marginal HE students. Whilst some may view HE in FE as a subordinate minority both in relation to the wider HE sector and its marginal position within its own setting, amongst a much larger FE student population, these factors are the very things that draw students toward it. The subject of HE in FE tutors’ teaching style is a potential line of future enquiry and invites further practitioner research at the College.

For future study at the University, it would be useful to follow those members of the focus group that progress to the University next year, to gain further understanding of ways in which their HE in FE experience does or does not prepare them for HE in HE, to understand their transition needs and draw these findings together, to build on success and develop practice for the future.
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