

Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: University of Sheffield
Unit of Assessment: 25 - Education
Title of case study: Developing Higher Education in Further Education Colleges
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>A twelve-year programme of research (2001-12) led by Professor Gareth Parry on higher education in further education colleges has produced impacts on policy development, institutional strategy and professional practice in England. The beneficiaries are the central authorities for higher and further education, the colleges of further education and their university partners, college managers and tutors, and thereby students and employers. The types of impact are changes to national funding and reporting arrangements; enhancements to policy and organisational learning; and contributions to institutional capacity-building. The vehicles for achieving impact are collaborations with policy, professional and practitioner communities through expert programmes, consultancies, databases, directories and guides to good practice. The reach of the impact is national, cross-sector and institutional, with a wider influence on debates across the UK and international developments including in Australia.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The research is the first to chart and analyse the contemporary contribution of further education colleges to English higher education. The findings assess the distinctiveness of this provision and the extent to which it has stimulated institutional diversity and wider access. Explanations are given for why growth in the size and share of higher education in the college sector – a goal of successive governments since 1997 – has not been achieved. The overall argument is that the structures of a two-sector system of further and higher education exercise a decisive, often contradictory, influence on efforts to build a larger role for colleges in higher education.</p> <p>The underpinning research was supported by five grants awarded by national agencies. All the research was based at Sheffield. It is the main body of academic work on this part of English higher education. In each study, the major user groups were partners in the conduct of the research. This work led, in turn, to follow-up projects funded by user organisations.</p> <p>(1) <i>The college contribution to higher education targets, 2001-02</i></p> <p>Funded by the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA), the research used documentary sources to trace the policy history of higher education in colleges. It analysed administrative data to identify patterns of provision and funding. The findings highlighted inconsistency and ambiguity in public policy arising from one sector being accorded lead responsibility for the higher education taught in another sector [R1].</p> <p>(2) <i>Review of agreements and arrangements for indirect funding, 2002-03</i></p> <p>This study, sponsored by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), surveyed all further education colleges and universities that were party to indirect funding arrangements. An analysis of funding agreements and case-study findings demonstrated low levels of transparency and trust in franchise relationships, with significant variation in the proportions of funding retained by universities. The asymmetries and uncertainties in these arrangements, it determined, were problematic for the growth of higher education in the college sector [R2].</p> <p>(3) <i>Universal access and dual regimes of further and higher education, 2006-08</i></p> <p>A grant from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) supported research on the nature and influence of sector separation on policy formation, organisational development and student mobility. The study found no developed rationale for a two-sector system and there was ambivalence about the combination of further and higher education in mixed-sector institutions. Student transitions were neither smooth nor seamless. In line with international evidence, the location of higher education in colleges had contributed to both democratisation and diversion [R3].</p> <p>(4) <i>Patterns of further and higher education in colleges and universities, 2009-10</i></p> <p>A second HEFCE-sponsored study used a fuzzy-matching tool to create a statistical picture of all types and levels of publicly funded tertiary education in England. It showed that the sub-contracting</p>

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of teaching to other institutions was an important feature of relationships within, as well as between, sectors. A technical report and commentary pointed to serious shortcomings in data coverage [R4].

(5) Understanding higher education in further education colleges, 2011-12

Research commissioned by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) is the most authoritative account of higher education in the college sector. Using qualitative and quantitative approaches, the study examined claims made for the distinctiveness of college-taught higher education. The important role of colleges in widening participation was confirmed, although the extent to which students were making informed choices was questioned. These were cost-effective locations for higher education but with limited scope for economies of scale. Responsiveness and flexibility were coupled with heterogeneity and short-termism [R5].

3. References to the research

- R1.** Parry G and Thompson A (2002) *Closer by Degrees. The Past, Present and Future of Higher Education in Further Education Colleges*. London: Learning and Skills Development Agency, 86pp (research publication arising from peer reviewed funding from the Learning and Skills Development Agency).
- R2.** Parry G (2003) Mass Higher Education and the English: Wherein the Colleges?, *Higher Education Quarterly*, 57 (4), pp 308-337. doi: [10.1111/j.0951-5224.2003.00250.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0951-5224.2003.00250.x)
- R3.** Parry G (ed) (2009) Special Issue on The College Contribution to English Higher Education: International and Contextual Commentaries, *Higher Education Quarterly*, 63 (4), pp 319-433.
- R4.** Rashid S, Parry G, Thompson A and Brooks G (2011) *Patterns of Further and Higher Education in Colleges and Universities in England: A Statistical Summary and Technical Commentary*. Bristol: HEFCE, 89pp. http://www.hefce.ac.uk/rdreports/2011/rd04_11 (research publication arising from peer reviewed research funding from HEFCE).
- R5.** Parry G, Callender C, Scott P and Temple P (2012) *Understanding Higher Education in Further Education Colleges*, BIS Research Paper 69. London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 219pp. <http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/higher-education/docs/12-905-understanding-higher-education-in-further-education-colleges> (research publication arising from peer reviewed research funding from BIS).

4. Details of the impact**Shaping national policy**

The research has contributed to revisions of policy, changes in implementation, assessments of progress, and challenges and changes to the thinking of national bodies. The direct beneficiaries were HEFCE, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), BIS and the Association of Colleges. As a result of the enhanced capability of these organisations in a hitherto underdeveloped area of policy, choices for students have improved and partnerships between colleges and universities have been better supported.

The core recommendations of the 2002-03 research were accepted by HEFCE and, following a review in 2005-06, implemented as sector policy [S1]. The measures adopted included 'a minimum period (three years) of security for the funding and student numbers available to them, so that colleges have more opportunity for long-term strategic investment in higher education' (HEFCE 2006). In another revision of policy consequent upon the research, HEFCE developed guidance on clarity and transparency in indirect funding partnerships. The same research, along with the findings of the 2001-02 LSDA study, underpinned the thematic review undertaken by Parry (2004) for the Foster inquiry into further education colleges in England (Foster 2005). These studies and the 2006-08 ESRC research were among the 'fundamental basic resources' used by the LSC to guide its policy on higher-level qualifications (LSC 2008).

As a result of its engagement with the Sheffield research, HEFCE funded a series of follow-on projects between 2007 and 2010 to advise on policy and assist with development. One of these, an independent monitoring and evaluation of the introduction of the new measures, led to a redesign of the implementation plan. These interventions, guided by the research evidence on how colleges

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managed their higher education, enabled HEFCE to secure higher education strategies from 240 out of 256 eligible colleges (HEFCE 2011). For small providers in particular, this was the first time their higher education was underpinned by an explicit strategy, with a positive impact on curriculum integration, student progression and the management of standards and quality.

Another type of impact was policy learning. Those benefiting were the responsible officers in HEFCE, the LSC, the Higher Education Academy (HEA), the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS), the AoC and the government directorates for higher and further education. In the absence of an overarching machinery for cross-sector policy development and intelligence, the research has enabled officials working in one sector to better comprehend contexts and complexities in the other. *'For those of us implementing policy for higher-level qualifications, the research has been insightful and critically interrogative. It has extended our understanding of policy history and development, including how sector strategies may sometimes diverge, even when the policy goal is the same'* (Head of Qualifications, Skills Funding Agency) [S2].

As a result of the 2011-12 BIS research, early assumptions about the costs and characteristics of higher education in colleges have given way to more evidence-based understandings. Advice to ministers and advisers from the research team made plain the difficulties surrounding growth and competition by further education institutions.

The vehicles for achieving policy learning were (a) research briefings for government officials (BIS) and ministers (Hodge, Howells, Willetts) (b) expert consultancies for sector bodies (LSIS) (c) memberships of key policy and advisory groups (the AoC, HEA and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education) and (d) invitations to contribute to national inquiries (Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning). Given the turnover of agencies in further and higher education, an unanticipated impact was the opportunity to inject a policy memory into public debates and decision-making, including the work of think tanks (Policy Exchange 2011) [S3].

Informing institutional strategy

The research has strengthened the capacity of colleges to develop, manage and monitor their strategies for higher education. The main beneficiaries were college managers, tutors and governors, especially those in the Mixed Economy Group and 157 Group of colleges.

Three follow-on projects undertaken for HEFCE were dedicated to the strategic development of higher education in colleges. The first evaluated a pilot exercise on the appraisal of college strategies (Parry and Thompson 2009) and the second drafted guidance on *Writing Higher Education Strategies* (HEFCE 2009). The latter was used by 240 colleges in preparing their submissions (attracting 552 page views). The third was a national leadership programme (2008-10) led by the Sheffield team and targeted at senior college managers. The expert programme of seminars and materials production was informed by the body of research completed since 2001, including the 2009-10 study on institutional profiles. Unique to its impact was the combination of resources assembled by the research team and contributed in confidence by participant colleges.

A total of 176 colleges were represented at five regional seminars. One of these events was designed for college governors and led to the production of a *Guide for Governors and Clerks* published by LSIS in 2009 [S4]. Sent to all college governing bodies, it is a key reference for their responsibilities and decisions on higher education. Each regional seminar featured inputs from HEFCE, QAA and the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE) with contributions from college principals. A core text for the programme was a book *Managing Higher Education in Colleges* authored by the research team and published by Continuum in 2006. This was written specifically for college personnel and its checklists are routinely used as tools in institutional planning. The success of the expert programme, as attested by HEFCE, was its reach and authority in equipping college leaders with a strategic reading of the changing landscape of higher education. This included international perspectives on the college mission in higher education.

The impact of the expert programme extended to Australia where Parry was invited to undertake an equivalent exercise in 2012. The funders were the Australian government, TAFE Directors Australia (TDA) and the University of Melbourne. The beneficiaries were federal and state government departments along with dual-sector and mixed-sector institutions in New South Wales,

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Victoria, Queensland and South Australia. Managers from over 60 colleges and universities were represented, including private providers. *'The lessons for Australia of the research on franchising were timely and influential. By bringing Gareth to Australia to share and debate these findings, we were able to equip our institutional strategies with an evidence base not previously available to colleges'* (Director of Policy and Stakeholder Engagement, TDA) [S5].

Guiding professional practice

The research has enhanced the professional development of staff in colleges and partner universities. The beneficiaries were (a) front-line lecturers, course leaders, curriculum managers, partnership directors and learning support workers; (b) the sector bodies responsible for continuing professional development; and (c) the student unions, including their local and national officers.

These were the audience for a 200-page good practice guide *Supporting Higher Education in Further Education Colleges: Policy, Practice and Prospects*. Authored by the Sheffield team and published by HEFCE in 2009, the guide has been one of its most requested reports. A total of 2173 hard copies were distributed (receiving 2510 page views in the first year of publication). Alongside a synthesis of research evidence, the guide showcased examples of good practice contributed by 60 organisations. The content was reviewed by a team of 26 readers from individual colleges and universities as well as the National Union of Students and the staff unions. Designed as a tool for staff development, it became the standard reference for professional practice: *'We valued its widespread use across the sector. As higher education moved up the policy agenda, every college had reason to access the guide, not least in meeting policy expectations which the authors had played a part in shaping'* (Assistant Chief Executive, AoC) [S6].

Directories, databases, websites, networks and training programmes were created for user groups by each of the five research studies. In accessing these resources, the colleges strengthened their capacity to manage, monitor and argue for a larger role in higher education. Their impact and importance were quickly recognised by the sector bodies who subsequently assumed lead responsibility for these services. Since 2007, a database on higher education coordinators compiled by the Sheffield team has been published by the HEA. In 2008, a directory on work-focused higher education in colleges and universities was produced by Foundation Degree Forward based on bibliographies and commentaries in the underpinning research. In 2012, the AoC published its own guide to higher education policy and practice. In 2013, LSIS and the LFHE launched an accredited professional development course based on a design developed three years earlier by Sheffield researchers for the HEFCE expert programme.

In sum, the research has benefited each of the responsible authorities and all of the further education colleges involved in higher education. The effects were planned, sustained and cumulative as well as indirect and sometimes contingent. The influences spanned high policy and local practice. Policy-making, capacity-building and strategic thinking have been enhanced. An infrastructure has been established to maximise present and future impacts.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- S1.** The Head of Funding at HEFCE can corroborate the adoption of the recommendations of the 2002-03 research and the operational benefits arising from subsequent follow-up projects.
- S2.** The Head of Qualifications at the Skills Funding Agency can corroborate the contributions to cross-sector policy learning and understanding.
- S3.** The Policy Exchange report (2011) shows the central place of research by Parry in contemporary policy debates on the higher education mission of colleges.
- S4.** The LSIS guide (2009) shows the translation of research findings into guidance for governors.
- S5.** The benefits to institutional planning and professional development in Australia can be corroborated by the Director of Policy and Stakeholder Engagement at TAFE Directors Australia.
- S6.** The nature and extent of use of the good practice guide (2009) can be corroborated by the Assistant Chief Executive at AoC.