

Appraising and reconfiguring HE in FE through research and critical perspectives

Editorial

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Educational research is famously ‘systematic enquiry made public’ (Stenhouse 1975: 142), but we now know it is also a public and political exercise in which groups come to share their values and beliefs in trying to understand what is happening and what actions can be taken (Shipman, 1997). We are going through a war on epistemology, as well as on ideology (Apple 2015) and in that sense, the group of scholars populating this special issue with research articles are exploring and challenging the ways in which HE in FE could be better viewed, defined and imagined in the present and in the future. In this introduction we maintain that HE in FE is a contested zone, however for clarity we need to explain that the focus of this special issue is higher education partly or wholly taught away from universities in further education colleges and their equivalent outside of England.

In an age of speedy information and economic austerity, the dialogues that reconfigure reality are not happening as they used to within our workplaces, but through research fora, such as this one, there is hope that they can. There is collaborative practice in evidence between two sectors that work well together, despite the pressures that may sometimes create conflict situations because of the politics behind the policies that over-burden both HE and FE. The question is therefore simply: what does HE in FE mean? How do we know that it exists and that it is not yet another trick ‘up the sleeve’ of policy makers to categorize and perpetuate binary distinctions between the positive and the negative, with no place in between for one sector that does education in many different ways for all of those who want to study further beyond school, or for all of those who want to retrain or up skill professionally? Should we not perhaps avoid even naming HE in FE, as if HE is a distinct and superior (more positive) sector? Why not simply FE, with no further binary distinction imposed? Is not everything really about further education after we have finished with being educated in school?

This special issue reconfigures the epistemology of HE in FE and asserts that it is ‘alive and kicking’ and, therefore, sustainable. We move away from the standard neo-liberal discourse about the FE crisis and deal with real human conditions on the ground and how these could be improved. In doing this we align with Mirowski (2013, 53) who has warned that ‘... crisis is the preferred

field of action for neo-liberals, since that offers more latitude for introduction of bold experimental “reforms” that only precipitate further crises down the road.’

This special issue aims to counter-balance the divide currently being played out between sectors of education, each vying for a slice of the funding and each actively metamorphosing in order to meet the latest priorities. The danger is that the latest government priorities become the latest curricula and that managerialism intensifies so that no one can resist such top-down doctrine and, therefore, in order to survive one might have to passively assimilate the hegemony (Chomsky 2003). What this special issue does is to give back the agency to a sector that has seen itself eroded over the years and is experiencing an identity crisis at the moment. We agree with Goodson (1999, 294) that ‘Only new alliances between theory and practice can remake the possibility for educational research to contribute to new visions and new structures of education.’ This is HE in FE, even though FE is the key player going through huge structural changes at the moment. What seems to resonate for this sector in England also seems to have its echoes in Ireland, Scotland, the USA, Canada and Australia, as demonstrated by contributors to this special issue.

The recent crisis in the English FE sector has led to media reports about the future of this sector and ways in which it is being threatened and starved of vital funding. For example, FE Week (2015) has recently reported on the need to rebalance funding between HE and FE at a time of austerity. If neo-liberalism operates best through crises, there is one now certainly being felt in FE with government Area Reviews of sufficiency and sustainability of provision currently taking place in England and threatening the future of many FECs (Further Education Colleges). There are also threats to the FE sector from the latest government drive to rationalize academies and sixth form colleges, as well as proposals for the TechBacc with the recent rise in University Technical Colleges (The Guardian 2015).

This special issue provides a space where on the ground research is yielding possibilities for what exactly the future of the HE in FE sector may well look like in the not too distant future, as well as appraising some of the empowering ‘goodness’ that characterizes it at present, such as powerful transformative pedagogies and a careful link with the local communities that have helped to shape it, including those students who attend and succeed from being there.

Higher Education provision in the Further Education sector has seen a massive increase due to a range of factors. With this expansion comes a new workforce of lecturers employed in the sector, as well as a new type of learner. This special issue assembles a range of articles that look in deep into this sector and examines the experiences of the current HE in FE lecturer workforce and student body. The result of such analyses would be targeted at HE in FE providers and their stakeholders documenting shared concerns and practices to promote greater understanding of the lecturer and learner experience and to guide continuing policy and professional development in

areas of need. The HE in FE sector is thereby re-defined as a space that is organic, shaped by experience, vibrant and systematically able to re-create itself in an age of competing agendas.

There was a thorough study of HE in FE provision by a team from the University of Sheffield and the UCL Institute of Education, University of London. This study was prompted by the HE in FE Conference of March 2011 and began its research then (BIS 2012). It studied the national picture and considered the practical, legal and economic issues. One of its key conclusions states that:

It is questionable if the students were making an informed choice of institution. When opting to study at a college rather than a university most had no, or very limited, experience of universities, and they were largely unaware or indifferent to what universities could offer. Nor were they particularly drawn to colleges because of the purported distinctive missions of further education colleges compared with higher education institutions, especially in terms of colleges' employer engagement activities. (BIS 2012, 13).

We aim to return to this central theme quoted above and unpick the reality on the ground and ways in which colleges could be more responsive to these agendas.

The articles that appear in this special issue talk to three main themes, and respond to three main questions. These are:

- What is the nature of HE in FE and how could it be improved in terms of policies that ought to recognise current inequity between two sectors?
- Who are the subjects and agents that are currently impacting at grassroots level on ~~this specific niche sector~~ the FE/HE interface?
- What are the latest innovations and powerful pedagogical practices that are making a difference ~~to this sector~~?

All articles tackle more than one of these questions, but for convenience sake, they have been grouped to illuminate in turn the particular foci of the overall debate within this special issue. We begin with the key question about the nature of HE in FE, framed within a discourse of inequality and possibly errors of judgement as to what ~~this niche sector~~ should be provided eding for the education and up skilling of its target students.

1. What is the nature of HE in FE and how could it be improved in terms of policies that ought to recognise current inequity between the two sectors of HE and of HE in FE?

The situation highlighted by BIS above seems to be still in existence in 2016, and in this special issue a number of articles try to unpick the reasons why HE in FE students may well not be 'making an informed choice of institution'. The rationale for the growth of what we here call HE in FE is mainly due to

students preferring the locality and small group sizes in the FE sector, as well as possibilities to study part-time and manage time and work-life balance, as reported in David Stoten's article. Stoten writes about the trends seen within cohorts of students studying HE in FE, confirming an imbalance in socio-economic profiles between those who attend HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) and those who attend GFECs (General Further Education Colleges); the latter being mainly drawn from the lower-middle or skilled manual classes of British society. Stoten asks 'Why is it that so few applications are received from the independent sector to study for HE programmes at GFECs?' and suggests further research to unpick the complexity behind the contested term of 'student choice'. The question of course is whether there is really a choice in a society that conditions people. Is this conditioning creating more inequality or is it that students are attracted by the employability prospects that FECS can more readily provide?

Inequality may well be what is affecting not only student choices but student destinations too, as is shown in Ann-Marie Bathmaker's article. She reports how graduates from FECS earn a lot less than graduates from HEIs, after having studied similar programmes. Comparing the UK with the USA, where similarities abound in terms of the current focus on the re-structure of this sector, Bathmaker concludes that HE in FE seems to be at the bottom of the HE hierarchy and argues for there being more focus on developing and finally realising a 'distinctive higher *vocational* education' or even a return to the concept of 'polytechnics'. The current austerity measures, however, are probably likely to undermine this realization and FE-HE, or college-based education (other terms also used to describe HE in FE) can be kept as a low-cost way of educating those who cannot afford universities.

There is perhaps more of this distinctive vocationally-oriented curriculum in the Australian VET (Vocational Education and Training) system, which is very similar to the English FE sector – an 'applied curriculum' - as [Elizabeth Leesa Wheelahan](#) states. Indeed, the 'college for all' that she writes about (and that she compares with the UK, the USA, Canada and New Zealand) has also given rise to the need to address 'sectoral divides' emerging from her Australian data and resonating with the situation in England. The conclusions from the Australian perspective are about how more superior 'elite' institutions of HE prepare students with recognizing different types of knowledge, such as disciplinary knowledge versus everyday knowledge, which more applied institutions do not necessarily do well and therefore are not, paradoxically, helping the disadvantaged overcome inequalities and social hierarchies.

A further interesting point made by Wheelahan is about the system of the community college in the USA, when she states that 'unlike further education colleges in England and TAFE (Technical and Further Education) institutes in Australia community colleges are explicitly considered to be HEIs in the US'. This resonates with our introduction to this editorial and the contested construct 'HE in FE', particularly in light of differing international understandings of what we might assume is a universal term. The situation of market-driven education remains however the same within the USA as it is in most Anglophone countries.

The inequity that accompanies such market-driven policy-making is examined in detail by James Avis and Kevin Orr. They provide a comprehensive review of the literature that has been produced about the area of HE in FE. They argue that the neo-liberal framework has meant that HE in FE policy initiatives have not closed the inequality gap. They demonstrate how inequality still persists despite all the rhetoric and the politics about Widening Participation. It is a piece that challenges our thinking about the wider implications for policies that perpetuate inequality in education and should instill in us the urge to do more to redress the balance.

Gary Husband and Michael Jeffrey's article adds to this debate about institutional factors prompted by policy changes that favour certain delivery models that tend to forget about 'FEness' in HE' as they put it – another take on the epistemology alluded to in our introduction earlier. Their intention is to show that there are distinct differences between FE and HE in how they support students and the curriculum and in how they respond to industry, communities and learners. They argue for a need to focus more on what FE can do best, which is to develop provision that delivers on the skills needs of higher level vocationally-orientated education. Their argument reflects the inequality often experienced and reported (including by the lecturing workforce) as regards HE in FE, and how the latter is currently made to follow the former's HE culture, instead of complementing it by focusing more upon vocational education and meeting economic needs.

2. Who are the subjects and agents that are currently impacting at grassroots level on ~~this specific niche sector~~ the FE/HE interface?

Karima Kadi-Hanifi and John Keenan, anchored within a 'community of practice' based on a close collaborative provision of teacher education courses between two GFECs and one local university, explore the professional self-concept of those who teach HE in FE with them. Through life history methods they argue that there is a kind of 'breed' of lecturers that are able to negotiate successfully the complex nature of being an HE lecturer within the FE sector. Their study sees the role of life events as a determinant of how prepared such lecturers are in terms of resilience, student-centeredness and other key factors that influence their success within this sector. Commonalities of experience such as having had to survive, or escape from, a school system that failed them, has given birth to an HE in FE lecturer self-concept that champions FE, whilst at the same time grounded within a successful HE practice that develops the future teachers of the FE sector. These lecturers are recognized by their managers who promote them to the HE teacher education courses almost as change agents who have the self-concept needed for factoring in 'HEness' within their known FE spaces.

Breda McTaggart argues that 'dual-sector' students are having anxiety relating to lack of support of their learning needs – 'dual-sector' being another way of thinking about the contested term of 'HE in FE' from an Irish perspective. Bourdieu is again part of the theoretical framework here as it was

for many of the articles regarding the first question posed in section one. It is about students not having the appropriate capital, economic and social. Similar to non-traditional students in HEIs, dual-sector students felt that there were barriers to their learning, such as lack of academic and personal support. McTaggart states '...these are neither traditional HE students nor non—traditional students but are contemporary HE students who are in fact becoming the norm', which seems to suggest that, just as there may well be a 'breed' of lecturer who takes on HE in FE teaching, so there could be too a 'breed' of student that takes on HE in FE courses. Have institutions and policy-makers not yet identified what a typical HE in FE student feels like? And are they not too in need of support systems that could improve their experience? This echoes a theme of the previous section which tackled the inequality experienced between those who study in traditional HEIs and those who attend FECs for higher education courses. More needs to be done on the ground to meet the needs of students who are sometimes caught in between two differing sectors without the necessary adjustments being made to their individual positions.

Denis Feather looks at FECs as employing organisations and interviews lecturers of HE in FE delivering HE Business courses. He reports how the word 'blame' appears as a common theme in the definitions of the organizational culture of the FEC by these lecturers. He states that '...there was a large degree of embitterment and resentment in what they were not allowed to do and what they were employed to do'. Common themes of relentlessly seeking funding, authoritarianism, constant change, and of bureaucracy, angst and stress are among the key findings from his data. Feather wonders how they could be installing 'HEness', or the need to conduct research and teach students about research, if the corporate culture within FECs were to remain managerialist. He concludes that FECs should be allowed to be again what they are good at, which is as service providers to communities and industry, and that government should not interfere in defining how FECs should meet its needs. What matters is how they can best serve their own stake-holders which they would know better than any other body or government. This article chimes with those within the first section that talked about high level vocationally-oriented curricula that are more fit for purpose and more in tune with the needs of the economy.

It is interesting that those themes were not the same ones identified within the findings from the life history project of teacher educators in FE by Kadi-Hanifi and Keenan, although the lecturers sampled mentioned periods of stress and heavy workloads, as well as tensions with funding priorities, which they dealt with in their own specific ways. Those lecturers rather championed the FE sector as a key formative element in their developing selves first as learners and thereafter as professionals. Could it be that the issue here is about the strength of collaborative partnerships between HE and FE in delivering courses via communities of practice that bypass managerialism? Or is it about the disciplines being delivered – those of Business versus Education? Or even perhaps is it about regional disparity between the West Midlands and the Yorkshire and Humber regions? Or is it about the uniqueness of certain

FECs and certain HEIs in how they select and then support their HE in FE workforce? There is need for more research or for more sharing of good practice if indeed some HE in FE spaces are managing to operate more successfully than others and if some lecturers are managing to be agents of change for some of the time, rather than mere subjects of bureaucratic managerialism for all of the time.

3. What are the latest innovations and powerful pedagogical practices that are making a difference ~~to this sector~~?

In this final section, we turn to some powerful examples of excellent practice in teaching, learning and assessing within empowering HE in FE spaces.

Alex Kendall and her research group explore the role of 'petits recits', literally 'little narratives', in the classroom and how students can genuinely help shape the curriculum with their tutors on an equal footing. Theirs is a focus on progressive learning and teaching practice and is a collaborative piece of work between lecturers in HE and students studying HE in FE. They argue 'Through our discussion of auto-ethnography we opened up and expanded definitions of what might be "counted" as data and the curatorial, productive role of the researcher as an agent of, rather than conduit or receptacle for, meaning making and taking. We would we suggested: make objects; tell stories; listen to stories; discuss our object and story making; curate and share symbolic objects; take pictures and audio recordings; and discuss our thoughts and feelings uninhibited by research conventions, interviews, structure or systematisation, along the way. We would "count" all of this as empirical *stuff*, material openings for our grappling with our own entanglement.' This is, indeed, very refreshing research that takes the edge off the conventional, hierarchical and deterministic ontology of HEness and gives it a new grassroots dimension. The notion of the rhizo curriculum is further explored in the article and this gives food for thought for pedagogies that empower learners in an age of super diversity and policies that perpetuate top-down, elite thinking, instead of bottom up agentic performance for change.

Jas Dhillon and Jon Bentley offer an unusual commentary on HE in FE, exploring its challenges and potential from the perspectives of governance, management and classroom practice. Their review of two GFECs in the English Midlands reveals imaginative and ambitious strategies for HE in FE, driven in part at least by college managers' desire to grow an HE income stream to offset successive deep funding reductions in their 16-18, adult and employer led income. It is clear that in the case study, college governors wholeheartedly endorse the colleges' strategy of developing responsive and work-based higher education through close educational partnerships with Universities. Such provision, in the words of a governor, is geared to offering 'the best skills training in the region'. It is, however, in the classroom that such ambition must be translated and realized. Often working with 'limited HE specific resources', the lecturers work hard to ensure they 'personalize

learning and provide individualized support (that) is greater than in a University’.

This section ends with a summary of another empowering piece about practice at grassroots level. Ewan Ingleby and Caroline Gibby’s article reports on a transformative learning ethos based on andragogy within a Foundation Degree course taught in FE. Theirs is also about the pedagogy needed for teaching ethics effectively within legal studies. They argue that the curriculum needs to be student-centered and open up the space for different literacies and different literacy practices, whilst also engaging emotions, values and feelings. They stress the importance of the role of the ‘Community of Practice’, using problem-based learning strategies that empower and transform. They recommend an assessment diet that includes oral and visual presentations and a pedagogy that avoids a ‘house that Jack built’ as they put it. For their subject of law and ethics, it was felt that students could not enhance their skills within the traditional law degree as adequately as they were doing within the HE in FE sphere. Regarding HE in FE in general, and based on the success of their programme with its pedagogy of transformation, they state that ‘The relative lack of research into this form of education in England is a problem in itself. The consequence is that there is a lack of reinforcement that this is an ideal form of post-compulsory education’.

We thus conclude this editorial on a note of hope giving the positivity that emanates from HE in FE practice its due. The sector is doing its best and against all the odds is producing some incomparable practice which ought to be celebrated. At the same time, through research, more could be done to improve the current state that HE in FE finds itself in, caught up within an unequal system of education, fast-changing policies and lack of funding, and therefore unable to even have the flexibility to do what it has always done very well which is to provide a flexible, multi-faceted, modern and empowering education to the communities that have had (and still do have) faith in its ability to meet their needs. If it is adequately supported and its many distinctive voices listened to, as is reported in these articles, perhaps it has a chance to thrive and find a more permanent identity that could help it defend its own corner in the face of continuing adversity and interference. The neo-liberal framework can be undermined and researching its impacts further is the beginning of the road to freedom.

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