

Summary review of further education provision in higher education 2003–09

This short review explores why further education provision has flourished in some higher education institutions but not in others. Drawing on inspection evidence from the period 2003 to 2009, the review illustrates the characteristics of the best and the least successful provision, from which it draws conclusions and makes recommendations.

Age group: All

Published: October 2009

Reference no: 090104

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Executive summary

The purpose of this review is to explore why further education (FE) provision has flourished in some higher education institutions but not in others. It summarises the context in which FE in higher education (HE) operates, and records recent inspection outcomes. The review illustrates the characteristics of the best and the least successful provision, from which it draws conclusions and makes recommendations. The review is based on evidence from inspections and monitoring visits between 2003 and 2009.

The mergers of HE institutions with satisfactory or failing general FE colleges have not led to significant improvement in the quality of the FE provision. The rationale for such mergers appeared attractive, offering students flexible opportunities to progress through basic, intermediate and high-level programmes and between vocational and academic education routes. In reality, it has been difficult for institutions to realise this vision and achieve high standards. There are examples of successful mergers but they have been primarily between specialist institutions, most notably within the creative arts.

In the best provision, the FE curriculum is closely aligned to the institution's HE expertise and experience, regardless of the number of FE students or the ratio of FE to HE.

Institutions knew their own strengths and weaknesses but there was a sharp contrast between how the best and the least successful providers reviewed, monitored and improved provision. It was only with robust quality assurance and clear lines of accountability that managers were able to take swift and effective action to address weaknesses.

A focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning on FE programmes was evident in those higher education institutions with good FE provision. A notable characteristic of these institutions was that FE teachers met regularly to discuss aspects of teaching and learning and to share good practice.

The different ways in which performance data were collected for the FE and HE sectors made it difficult to compare FE in HE with similar provision offered in FE colleges. Most of the larger FE in HE providers compensated for this by producing their own data using in-house software similar to that used in colleges, but this was not the case for many of those higher education institutions with relatively few FE students.

Key findings

- The mergers of higher education institutions with satisfactory or failing FE colleges that had a broad academic and vocational curriculum have not led to significant improvement in the quality of the FE programmes.
- Higher education institutions with successful FE provision had a curriculum offer that was closely aligned to the institution's expertise, experience and HE programmes.
- FE students were well served by higher education institutions that specialised in the creative arts.
- Accountability and line management arrangements for FE within higher education institutions were clear where the FE was successful.
- Rigorous quality assurance and good teaching and learning were key to raising standards and to maintaining high quality FE provision.
- The size of the institution did not have an impact on the quality of its FE provision.

Recommendations

The Department for Business Innovation and Skills, together with relevant funding bodies, should:

- take into account the findings of this review when reviewing plans for proposed mergers between higher education institutions and FE colleges
- consider what arrangements are needed to better support existing merged institutions.

The Higher Education Statistics Agency, together with relevant funding bodies, should:

- produce timely performance data in a format that makes it possible to compare all FE provision in higher education institutions with similar programmes in FE colleges.

Higher education institutions with FE provision should:

- establish, or maintain, clear lines of accountability for FE provision at both senior and middle management levels
- sustain a focus on improving teaching and learning
- implement, or maintain, rigorous quality assurance systems that are particularly well suited for FE, make good use of available data and focus primarily on raising standards.

Background

1. Of approximately two million students studying at higher education institutions in England in 2007/08, just over 45,500 were studying on FE programmes.¹ The full-time equivalent number of FE students in HE was around 22,000, reflecting the fact that a large proportion were studying on a part-time basis.² As is the case for FE in colleges, FE in higher education institutions is funded by the Learning and Skills Council. In 2007/08, the Learning and Skills Council allocated approximately £94 million to FE in HE.³ Of the 130 higher education institutions in England, Learning and Skills Council data show that 32 offered FE provision.
2. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education provides an assessment of higher education quality and academic standards both in higher education institutions and in FE colleges that also offer HE.
3. For just over half of the higher education institutions offering FE programmes in 2007/08, Learning and Skills Council-funded provision represented a very small proportion of their student population and income; for most of them less than 1%. Where this was the case, the HEI was offering just one or two programmes, most commonly as preparation for progression into HE or as a form of enrichment.
4. For the other institutions, FE represented a more significant proportion of the higher education institutions' student population. In effect, approximately 86% of all FE provision in HE was located within 13 of the 32 providers. Some of these institutions focused primarily on specialist provision, for example, art or land-based education and training. Others combined a wider range of academic and vocational programmes. The majority of these higher education institutions acquired FE provision as a consequence of merging with one or more general FE and/or specialist colleges within the last 10 years. In some cases, though, the FE programmes had been developed as a result of strategic partnerships with other providers.
5. Almost all of the higher education institutions with significant FE provision produced their own performance data using in-house software similar to that found in FE colleges. This enabled them to compare their retention, achievement and success rates to national averages for similar provision offered in FE colleges. However, this was not the case for most of the higher education

¹ Higher Education Statistics Agency – 'Statistical first release 130' states that the total number of HE enrolments at English HEIs stood at 1,922,185 in 2007/08.

² Data provided by the Learning and Skills Council state that the total number of learners on FE programmes in HE was 45,568 in 2007/08 and the number of full-time equivalent learners was 22,088.

³ Data provided by the Learning and Skills Council state that the total funding allocation was £93,525,503.

institutions with relatively few FE students. Performance data for the HE sector produced by the Higher Education Statistics Agency were in a format that made it difficult to make judgements about how this relatively small scale FE, located in 19 institutions, compared with FE elsewhere.

Findings of the review

Inspection outcomes

6. Between 2003 and 2005, Ofsted inspected 20 higher education institutions each of which, at that time, had more than 500 students on roll studying FE programmes. Ten were judged to be very good or outstanding, one was good and the rest were satisfactory.⁴
7. The most recent cycle of inspection activity was completed in 2009. In keeping with the trend towards a lighter touch approach to inspection for higher performing institutions, and the fact that Ofsted was a signatory to an agreement to reduce the burden on higher education institutions, only the 13 relatively large FE in HE providers were subject to one-day monitoring visits. These visits highlighted concerns about standards in six higher education institutions. Consequently, the FE provision in these six providers was inspected. Three were judged to be inadequate and three satisfactory. One of the three higher education institutions with inadequate FE provision has since improved to satisfactory, following a reinspection.

Key features of the least successful provision

8. Too many students had failed to achieve their qualification, get the grades expected of them or complete their course of study. Successful curriculum areas and individual courses were identified within providers, but overall, when compared with similar provision offered in FE and sixth form colleges, success rates had not kept pace with an improving national picture over the last five years. This was particularly evident where higher education institutions had merged with satisfactory or failing colleges. Of the four higher education institutions whose FE provision most closely resembled a general FE college, one was inadequate, having merged with a failing college five years ago; another had yet to address a wide range of problems associated with the FE programmes it inherited from different institutions. The other two higher education institutions merged with colleges 10 years ago and, in both cases, the FE provision remained satisfactory, as it was at the time of their previous inspections. One of these two institutions has since transferred its FE provision back to the further education sector.

⁴ Ofsted categorised all FE providers on a five-point scale, based on prior inspection outcomes, for the purpose of risk assessment.

9. The quality of teaching and learning was not good enough. Too often, planning was poor and failed to take account of what students already knew or could do, as in the following example from a published report.

Too many teachers still have limited expectations of what their students might understand or do and so fail to create enough opportunities for them to contribute to lessons by exploring knowledge or rehearsing skills themselves.

10. In lessons, teachers did not consistently check or reinforce learning. Target-setting was weak and often manifested itself as a list of tasks for students that were not personalised, did not relate to achievement and were not monitored. There was good teaching in each institution, but pockets of good practice tended to be contained within specific curriculum areas or teams.
11. Leaders and managers had been slow to raise standards. They were committed to improving provision, raising the profile of FE both internally and externally and addressing identified weaknesses. However, as the example below illustrates, managers' actions were often thwarted or delayed by unclear lines of accountability.

The effectiveness of efforts to tackle weaker performance has been slow, and in some cases negligible, for example in relation to raising standards on GCSE and A-level courses. FE leaders have made determined efforts to bring about improvements, but complex line management arrangements across the institution have exacerbated the slow response to areas of weak performance.

12. Quality assurance arrangements were not consistently or rigorously implemented. This was due in part to the fact that one institution-wide system designed primarily for HE was not ideally suited to FE, and operating two separate systems led to overly complex reporting arrangements. Self-assessment reports were not always accurate because they overstated strengths and gave insufficient weighting to weaknesses, as in the following example.

Some curriculum action plans are incomplete, incorrect and contradictory. Targets are often vague and major concerns regarding achievement and standards are under-emphasised. The internal lesson observation system has improved and outcomes inform staff development and appraisal well, but lessons are often over graded.

13. The use of data lacked sophistication. With one newly merged institution, the self-assessment process was hindered by a lack of access to timely and accurate data. In other institutions, where data were readily available, they were not analysed carefully or used effectively to monitor trends or inform planning, particularly at curriculum level. Where senior managers, who were more familiar with HE data, were presented only with top-level FE data, they

remained unaware that the analysis disguised weaknesses in different aspects of the FE provision.

Key characteristics of good or better provision

14. The characteristics of the best FE in HE were, unsurprisingly, similar to those of other successful educational institutions. They included high success rates, with improvements in recent years and/or the maintenance of high standards, teaching and learning that was at least good, very good support for students and highly effective leadership and management. As the focus of this review is on the quality of FE provision located within higher education institutions, the additional characteristics identified below are of particular note.
15. The FE curriculum offer in HE was relatively narrow. For example, three of the most successful institutions specialised in the creative arts, where the rationale for the FE provision was clear in that it was primarily preparation for progression into HE, often within the same institution. Students studying FE-level art courses, most frequently the foundation diploma, achieved well in specialist higher education institutions. They benefited, in particular, from working within a self-critical culture and alongside HE students, as well as having access to industry standard resources, visiting artists and highly qualified staff. Other examples of successful provision with a relatively narrow curriculum included an institution with a focus on service industries, most notably catering and hospitality, and another that provided education and training for the maritime industry. However, not all specialist higher education institutions had good FE provision, as illustrated by the fact that most FE land-based programmes within higher education institutions were only satisfactory.
16. In good or better providers teachers routinely reflected on their teaching and shared good practice. A key feature of the better provision was that there were formal mechanisms for those teaching on FE programmes in different parts of their institution to meet each other to discuss aspects of teaching and learning. This took the form of FE forums or development days. In one higher education institution with a collegiate structure, teachers from the different colleges worked together as indicated below.

Colleges are working together ... to support further developments in teaching and learning, assessment, moderation and staff development. Staff ... spoke very positively about the benefits this is having on developing ways of working, sharing best practice and staff communications. They are developing formal and informal networks to share ideas and practice and this is supporting a much more reflective culture amongst staff.

17. In good or better provision lines of accountability were clear. Inspection evidence suggests that what worked for one institution, in terms of organisational structures, did not necessarily work in another. It was not simply

a choice between two models – integrating FE into academic units that offered similar HE subjects or keeping all the FE together as a distinct entity. As noted in Ofsted's report *How colleges improve*, organisational structures are not easily transferable between institutions, because the context in which they are implemented and the people responsible for operational performance are not the same.⁵ In successful higher education institutions, what was important was that the structure worked for the FE, as well as for the HE provision.

18. Quality assurance was rigorous and managers made good use of data to analyse trends and inform planning, as in the following example.

Quality assurance arrangements remain robust and rigorous...Self-assessment has been conducted across the merged institution with the new manager producing an overall FE self-assessment report for review and approval by the academic board. The process now includes reviews of individual pathways, leading to an overall course review for each course and campus. This in turn informs the cross-institution review for all FE education provision. Course level self-assessments provide a detailed analysis of performance data and students' satisfaction surveys, with clearly identified strengths and areas for development. Action plans include all areas for improvement and progress is monitored throughout the year.

In sharp contrast to those institutions with inadequate FE provision, the best FE in HE benefited from the least complex management structures and the most robust systems to efficiently review, monitor, improve and adapt FE programmes.

⁵ *How colleges improve*, Ofsted, 2008; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/080083.

Notes

Between 2003 and 2005, Her Majesty's Inspectors, accompanied by additional inspectors, undertook 20 full inspections of FE provision in higher education institutions. In the most recent inspection cycle, completed in 2009, Her Majesty's inspectors undertook one-day monitoring visits to 13 higher education institutions to review progress since their previous inspection. Concerns about standards during these visits led to subsequent inspections for six of the 13 providers.

Further information

Inspection reports and monitoring visit letters can be found on our website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Statistics about publicly funded UK higher education can be found on the Higher Education Statistics Agency website: www.hesa.ac.uk.

Reviews on higher education quality and academic standards can be found on the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education website: www.qaa.ac.uk.

The report *How colleges improve* can be found on our website: www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/080083.