

The Impact of FE / HE Mergers

Interim findings

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Mergers between further education colleges and higher education institutions

Purpose

This paper outlines the results of an analysis of the curriculum offer and student numbers at former further education colleges who have transferred to the higher education sector following mergers with higher education institutions. It also includes some brief background information on the situation with regard to the FE asset base in the new institutions.

Key findings

Initial analysis shows that the curriculum offered to the local community at level 3 and below has not suffered as a result of the merger. Evidence of a decline in student numbers is less clear. Following an initial fall in student numbers, some institutions have sustained year-on year improvements whilst student numbers in others continue to decline.

Background

In total, nine colleges have merged with higher education institutions since Incorporation in 1993.

This paper looks at the five most recent mergers which have taken place between 1 August 1998 and 1 August 2000:

- Harrogate College and Leeds Metropolitan University merged on 1 August 1998
- High Peak College and University of Derby merged on 1 August 1998
- Newton Rigg College merged with University of Central Lancashire on 1 August 1998
- Brackenhurst College merged with Nottingham Trent University on 1 April 1999
- Cordwainers College merged with London Institute on 1 August 2000

Harrogate College and High Peak College were general further education colleges while Brackenhurst College and Newton Rigg College were colleges of agriculture and horticulture. Cordwainers College was a specialist designated institution.

All mergers were approved on the understanding that the level of FE provision prior to each merger would be maintained by the newly formed institutions. FE assets are protected in line with the asset deeds signed at the point of merger. The FE assets remained the property of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). The FE assets are now owned by the LSC.

Data on the FE provision on offer at these merged institutions are returned to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). These data are then passed to the LSC. Concerns exist over the quality of these data returned to the LSC. Retention and achievement data in particular are not credible. However the number of enrolments on each course are considered to be accurate.

Carrying out the research

We have carried out an analysis of the curriculum offer at the five former FE colleges using information available on the institution websites, including online prospectuses and other marketing information. We have used Individual Student Records (ISRs) and HESA data to track changes in student numbers from immediately before the merger to the latest date for which information is available (2000 – 2001). Information on FE assets has been provided by the Provision and Infrastructure team.

The curriculum offer analysis is based on a review of websites, current prospectuses and other promotional material. While the curriculum offer does not mean that all provision is subscribed to, it does represent the potential provision available to the local community at the present time. No account has been taken at this stage of the extent to which other provision within the local area is complementary or the extent to which the merger has led to rationalisation of provision in the area. Both of these factors are likely to have an influence on the current offer and its uptake.

Curriculum offer

A review of the curriculum on offer at the two former general FE colleges shows that the curriculum on offer remains comparable with that offered by other similar sized colleges in similar locations:

- Levels 2 and 3 both colleges offer broadly based academic and vocational provision for 16-19 year olds and adults
- Level 1 both colleges offer discrete programmes of supported learning for learners with learning difficulties and / or disabilities
- Work-based learning both former FE colleges continue to offer FMA and AMA programmes

Websites reflect the FE provision within the broader context and framework of the HE institution. The websites give access to a wide range of information on each of the centres including on-line prospectuses and application forms. The relevant FE pages, however, are subsumed within the main university sites.

Former High Peak College

High Peak College merged with the University of Derby on 1 August 1998 and is now designated as the Buxton Campus. There is an extensive range of provision offered at levels 2 and 3 comprising academic and vocational programmes including business studies, care, retailing, hair and beauty, and motor vehicle. There is no construction provision. There is a discrete level 1 supported learning provision for learners with learning difficulties and / or disabilities.

Both FMA and AMA programmes are offered in the main vocational areas noted above.

Courses are available to both full and part-time students and are marketed to both 16-19 year olds and adults within the context of continued, lifelong learning.

The Buxton Campus website projects a strong post-16, non-HE provision with additional information on open days and an emphasis on encouraging access to learning and progression whatever age or ability level.

Former Harrogate College

Harrogate College merged with Leeds Metropolitan University on 1 August 1998 and now operates as a separate faculty although it retains its own identity as Harrogate College.

There is a clear emphasis on FE provision with a wide range of provision especially at levels 2 and 3 but also opportunities at level 1 to encourage young people who have not succeeded at school to

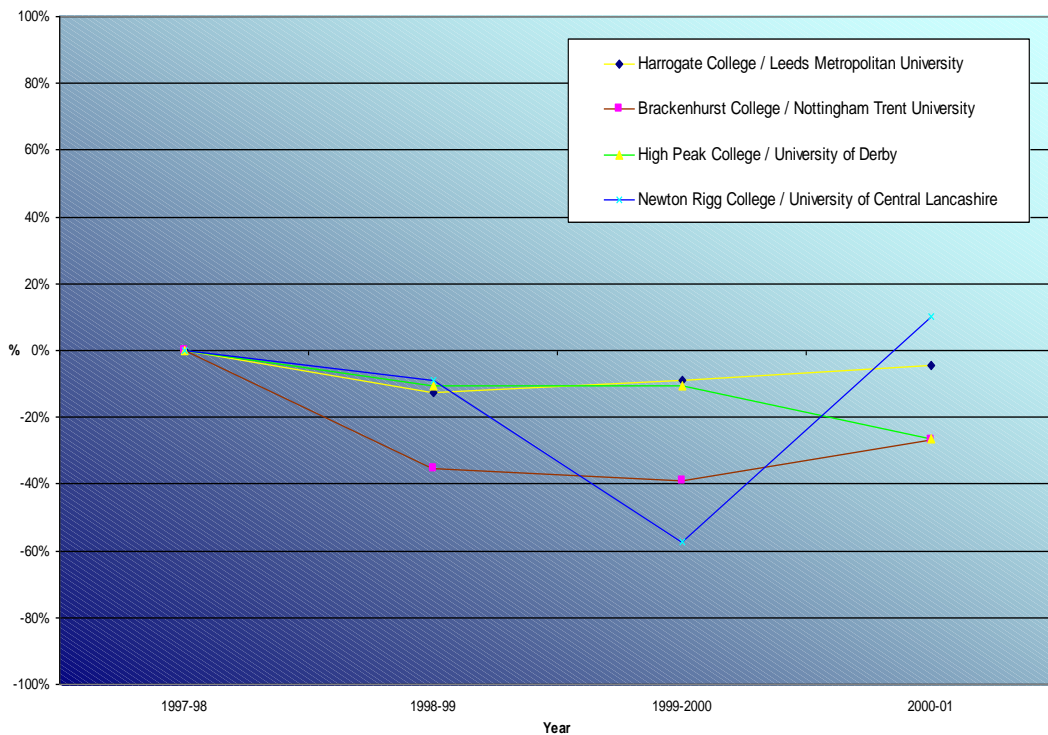
return to learning. There are not separate or distinct offers for 16-19 year olds and adults.

The college supports delivery of both Foundation and Advanced Modern Apprenticeships. The web site demonstrates the college's efforts to engage the local community and encourage continued learning although the website home page (accessible through the main university website) does project a fairly strong HE image ('latest news' is all HE). Behind this, however, is an extensive range of information on the FE offer and the college.

Student numbers

Evidence of a decline in student numbers is unclear. Analysis looking at the trends in FE enrolments at the institutions that merged between 1998 and 1999 shows that there was a significant decrease in FE enrolments in the academic year following the merger. This is consistent with the findings of the FEFC's Evaluation of Mergers in the Further Education Sector (FEFC, March 2000) which reported falls in student numbers in the first year following merger in six out of nine colleges studied. However, in most cases FE enrolments have shown upward trends in numbers and are approaching the levels seen in the institutions prior to merger. It is important to note that enrolments at the former High Peak College show a continued and accelerated decline. The attached chart illustrates the findings.

Chart 1: Percentage change in student numbers from 1997/98 levels



FE Assets

Under section 10 of the deeds preserving the FE asset base, the provisions of the FE asset deeds should be reviewed within three years of the merger. The Council reserves the right to revoke the whole deed, subject to the right of the institution to appeal to the Secretary of State. The Council may do so if partial or total failure occurs. Partial failure is defined as any failure by the institution to achieve 90% of the total units for which it is funded by the Council for its FE provision, or 75% of any constituent part of that programme. Total failure is defined as any failure by the institution to achieve a level of units of activity that in the opinion of the Council results in a serious under-utilisation of the FE asset base for the purposes of FE provision.

A review of the FE asset deeds for the institutions formed by the above mergers have not yet been carried out by local LSC colleagues. However, there are plans to carry out an assessment of the FE asset deeds at University of Derby in the near future.

Recommendations

1. Local LSC colleagues should visit the institutions formed as a result of FE / HE mergers and report their findings, commenting on whether the FE assets are being used to supply FE provision in line with the provision offered prior to merger.
2. The FE provision at institutions formed as a result of FE / HE mergers should be regularly monitored to ensure that the level of provision is maintained. Guidance should be issued to colleagues in local LSCs and should be drawn up following visits to the institutions identified in this report.

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