Higher viewpoints: studying Higher Education in a Further Education College

An analysis of student experiences

Madeleine King, Dr Arti Saraswat and John Widdowson, CBE
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreword</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. <strong>Introduction</strong> (Summary of the Survey Findings)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Background</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. <strong>The Survey Findings</strong></td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 General Context</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Results of the Survey</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 College Successes</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 Other Aspects to Consider</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 Potential Areas for Review</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. <strong>Summary</strong></td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. <strong>Conclusion</strong></td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Appendices

- **Appendix 1**: The experiences of International/EU students studying HE in English Further Education Colleges  
  Page 32

- **Appendix 2**: The experiences Part Time students studying HE in English Further Education Colleges  
  Page 34

- **Appendix 3**: The experiences of Full Time students studying HE in English Further Education Colleges  
  Page 36
Acknowledgements

Over 800 college students contributed to this piece of work and we are grateful for the time that they allocated to what was a particularly lengthy questionnaire. We also acknowledge the support we received from college teaching staff: the high level of survey participation is due in no small measure to their encouragement of their students.

Thanks also go to Malcolm McBain, Head of Student Progression, at New College Durham, and Clive Turner, Director of Higher Education at City College Norwich, who offered comments on our observations and conclusions and generally kept us grounded in reality.

Finally, we are grateful to the Learning and Skills Improvement Service. LSIS funded our research and encouraged us to pursue the views of three particular groups of students who were studying HE in an FE college. The students’ responses to the surveys offer a rare insight into the perception of HE delivered in FE and of the impact of the new HE funding and finance arrangements on those perceptions.

Madeleine King, Dr Arti Saraswat and John Widdowson, CBE
November 2013
Foreword

“Students at the heart of the system” has become the rallying cry for the latest initiatives in Higher Education. Some would argue that for students studying HE in Colleges of Further Education this is where they have always been. However, in the wider world of Higher Education, the voice of these particular students has been difficult to hear except at institutional level.

These three enquiries into the experiences of those studying Full Time, Part Time and as students from outside the UK is thus timely and highly relevant to the debate about the future shape of our HE system. HE in FE is a small but vital element in that HE landscape. Colleges are successful in widening participation from under-represented groups and have a key role to play in supporting mature learners and Part Time students. Their expectations and experiences are often different to those of their peers studying in universities but are no less worthy of consideration. They present challenges to providers of all types.

John Widdowson CBE
Chair, Mixed Economy Group
Principal and Chief Executive New College Durham
Summary of the Survey Findings

1. Introduction

Some 10% of all undergraduate HE is in delivered in an FE college setting, together with an unknown number of other students pursuing higher level NVQs and professional qualifications awarded by professional bodies. Whilst Higher Education will always be a minority component of any FE college’s offer, within some colleges the volume of HE is significant and compares well to student numbers in some of England’s smaller universities. Policy-makers and those teaching HE in FE will find it helpful to understand what students who are pursuing their HE in an FE college think of that experience.

This study sets out to illuminate the student experience of HE in FE. It does so by capturing students’ motivations to study HE in an English FE college and their academic and college support-related experiences. On the basis of these, we asked them if they considered the experience to offer value for money and if they would recommend their institution to others. The results are presented here in a Summary or overview report which refers to three separate enquiries undertaken across six months. It compares the findings of three student groups and offers some discussion points for colleges, BIS, employers and partner universities.

One of the objectives of the project was to compare the views of three different types of students to see if their particular circumstances influenced their view of a number of factors. The three groups were:

1.1 European Union and International students. This group was chosen for a number of reasons. Very little research has taken place amongst EU or International students pursuing their HE in an English FE college and the survey team wanted to see if their motivations and experiences were different to those of “Home “students. We also wanted to test the impact of rising fee levels on the perceptions of both EU and overseas students. Whilst the former are charged the same fee and are able to draw down the same financial support as Home students, we were interested to find out the impact of a fee level which was usually far higher than would have been the case in their own countries. We also wanted to find out if their broader expectations of an English HE course were realised.

International students, in contrast, have always been subject to higher fees. The researchers particularly wanted to know why these respondents chose to study in a college when the majority of overseas students study at universities. Although they are a small percentage of HE students in any college setting, the financial contribution made by this group is not insignificant and some colleges have ambitions to increase their International student numbers.

1.2 Part Time students. This group was chosen because the numbers of these students have reduced year-on-year over the last three years and significantly so in 2012-2013. The majority of students in this group are older, i.e. over the age of 25, and are endeavouring to improve their levels of skills with the help of their employer. The declining population of 18-24 year olds across Europe, including
England, is of concern to policy makers: Europe-wide, the need in future will be for those able to undertake knowledge and skills-intensive jobs, rising from 29% of all employment in 2010 to 35% in 2020. This group therefore is of interest to national policy makers at a time of falling birth rates and an on-going need to raise skills levels in the workplace.

1.3 Full Time students. In the main these are younger students, and thus provide a good contrast to the previous group. The majority of college-based undergraduates study on a Full Time basis: 52% of those following Foundation Degree and Bachelors programmes do so as FT students. It was therefore important to find out what this majority group thought of their experiences and why they had elected to study at a college rather than follow a more traditional three year FT university route. This group was split into two, enabling a comparison to be made between the views of students who had moved immediately into college-based HE from an FE course and those who joined a FT course after some years of experience in the workplace.

Two further analyses were conducted within this group. One was to look at the perceptions of students who were in their First year of study and compare them to those of students in their Second or Third years. The First year students were subject to the new higher fees regime and consequently may have had different perspectives on issues such as value for money, taught hours and institutional support.

Secondly, we wanted to analyse the views of mature students (those over 25) in regard to some particular areas of interest. The purpose here was to see how well college staff meet the needs of older HE learners, given that most college students (i.e., FE and HE combined) are aged 16 – 24.

A total of 855 students from 27 colleges responded to our surveys. A core of 6 General FE colleges was represented in each one of the three studies. An additional 18 institutions took part in each of two others with 3 colleges taking part in only one study. Whilst most respondents were studying at a college in MEG membership, these included specialist Art and Design and Land based providers, as well as those with a volume of HE nearer to 500 FTE (the minimum for MEG membership) and others with significantly larger volumes of provision.

Our three reports can be read as standalone documents. Each of these is an individual and detailed study of a particular group of students: it is beyond the scope of this overview report to provide full details of each one but they can be read on the MEG website at www.mixedeconomygroup.co.uk

This Summary sets out our key findings and illustrates the differences and commonalities between the groups. It offers advice to colleges, partner universities and policy makers from the basis of those findings.
2. **Background**

The student experience of HE has become a focus of both institutional and policy-making interest. The current delivery of HE in both universities and colleges is framed by rising fees, a change in the funding arrangements for HE, new approaches to student finance and a competitive market for students in a situation where student numbers are deliberately limited in order to restrict calls on the student support budget. Within this, students focus on fee levels and funding, and more immediate areas such as contact time, the quality and style of teaching, the administrative arrangements concerning matters such as the marking and return of assignments, staff approachability and the quality of their institutions’ learning resources.

The student voice is sought in the process of academic review: the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) involved students in the Integrated Quality, Enhancement and Review process and the successor Review of College Higher Education arrangements. These have now been replaced by the Higher Education Review (HER): for the first time ever, there is now one HE quality assurance process which is common to both universities and colleges. Using as its reference point the new UK Quality Code the HER places much greater emphasis on student engagement in all aspects of quality assurance, programme design and approval as well as influence over the overall student experience.

The student voice is a formal part of the HER processes and institutions, NUS and local student unions are encouraging student involvement in the assessment of the quality of the HE that is delivered in return for a student fee.

In its review of 2014-2015 Access Agreements, the Office For Fair Access (OFFA) notes that the number of HE institutions charging the maximum tuition fee of £9,000 will increase from 75% in 2013-2014 to 90% the following year. Whilst this may act as a significant disincentive to higher study for some, it will also sharpen student perceptions around the balance between expectation and experience - and value for money. Whilst no colleges yet charge the maximum, most have a fee of between £6,000 and £8,500.

The concept of the student as consumer has been discussed for some time. Various voices have counselled against a purely market-driven, transactional approach to HE, referring instead to the need for students to be seen as partners in the development and delivery of a programme of HE. Peter Carey\(^1\) refers to "growing consumerism in the British higher education sector. This has been associated with the introduction of tuition fees in English universities in the late 1990s. It has been argued that this has forced universities to attend more carefully to their students’ needs."

---

The annual National Student Survey, which is now in its eighth year, was one of the earliest formal mechanisms established to capture the student view. Always acknowledged to have significant flaws, it nonetheless sets out to offer the students’ view of provision at most HE institutions, including colleges. As noted earlier, college-based HE represents about 10% of all undergraduate HE. Unsurprisingly then, most studies of the student perspective which use NSS data are based around the experiences of university students in their final year of study. However, NSS scores are only collected when the response rate reaches 50% and many colleges have found it difficult to ensure that sufficient numbers of their students, including Part Time students, complete the survey.

The NSS is important to students and to HE institutions alike. It provides data used by the QAA in the course of the formal review process, in nationally produced league tables and in the production of the web page ‘Key Information Set (KIS) widget’ which provides a summary of certain key facts for each course offered by a provider. Given the increasing importance of web-based research by prospective students into their eventual choice of preferred provider, the NSS data is becoming increasingly important in determining the destination of many prospective students. For colleges offering HE there are some particular issues arising out of the data collection and data analysis methods employed in the production of the survey itself. Colleges tend to recruit much smaller numbers at individual course level so very often the KIS data relating to a particular course is unavailable. The KIS data can also be unhelpfully aggregated using JACS codes such that the data in the KIS widget – which must be displayed on the course web page - gives no useful insight for the reader into the performance of an individual course.

There are challenges for colleges with regard to the completion of the NSS in respect of the question set - which is fixed - and the recruitment profile of most colleges. They have more PT provision, more students in work, and more mature students with different expectations of their HE provider than the ‘traditional’ university undergraduate. College students completing the NSS can therefore find it difficult to answer the given set of questions in any meaningful way. Analysis of NSS data at institution level can be problematic. For colleges with smaller numbers the results may not be disaggregated from those of their partner HEI, through which the NSS data is collected. For some colleges NSS data will come from 2 sources – the partner HEI and from the NSS results of their own HEFCE contract students (following the distribution of student numbers to colleges through the SNC allocations since 2012/13). HESA (and therefore the Unistats website which draws its data from HESA) cannot yet bring together the data from these two sources to produce reliable, meaningful information.

It is to be hoped that the current discussions between a working group with FEC representation and HEFCE/HESA will address and resolve some of these difficulties. In the meantime, student perceptions of their HE in FE courses remain less researched and under-reported.

A relatively small number of authors have led work in this area, e.g. studies were undertaken by Jones (2006), Turner et al (2009), Feather (2011) and, more recently Parry et al (2012). However, none of these has specifically addressed the student experience of college-based HE. Previous work has tended to focus on issues such as
the origins of the current arrangements for HE in FE, scholarly activity undertaken by
staff teaching HE in a college setting or the means by which a culture of HE can be
established in an FE college. Whilst the recent Parry research\(^2\) is one of the more
comprehensive studies of HE in FE and does include a study of the student
experience, its overall purpose is to paint a picture of what is currently happening in
college-based HE, rather than to analyse the views of HE students. The student
experience of HE in FE, therefore, remains comparatively under-researched.

The Mixed Economy Group of colleges regularly undertakes studies into HE in FE.
These are available on the group’s website mixedeconomygroup.co.uk. In 2010, MEG
had carried out a similar enquiry to that of Parry et al referred to above.\(^3\) The current
survey team regarded these two reports as comparators for an analysis which would
update the understanding of student views in a new fee environment. In the 2010
exercise, a survey of 828 students from 17 colleges set out to discover why students
had opted to study HE in an FE college, what was important to them in selecting their
course of study, and what they hoped to achieve as a result of their studies. They were
also asked to provide information about whether they studied Full or Part Time, how
many hours a week they were taught and what age band they fitted into. In addition,
they were invited to add any other comments about their course and college. The
report concluded that students choose their college because of its location and
reputation. They valued their teachers and many, particularly the younger students,
had deliberately chosen to study HE in an FE college. (In other words, they had not
found themselves in a college because they had failed to obtain a place at a
university.) Lower fees than would have been charged at a university were also a
factor in their choice. 45% of 18-20 year olds and 40% of 21-25 year olds considered
this to be an important consideration.

In our 2013 report we seek to expand on these earlier findings and illuminate some of
the factors which significantly influence students’ opinions of their college-based HE.
Those opinions will in turn influence employers’ decisions over whether or not to
support future work-based learners as well as shaping the views of the students’ own
parents or children, who may themselves be potential HE students. Our findings are
set out in detail in the individual reports and in summary form in this paper.

3. The Survey findings

3.1 General context

The survey was conducted amongst three distinct groups of students in order to
record and compare their different perspectives on a particular number of points.
However, it is helpful to look at some overall findings before we begin any detailed
comparisons. These are drawn from the following statistics:

\(^2\) Understanding Higher Education in further Education Colleges. BIS 2012.
\(^3\) Strategic Options, Operational Challenges, Appendix D. MEG 2010.
With the caveat that not all of the students who took part in our surveys answered all of the questions, our three studies gave us the following overall picture. We begin with a summary of our findings.

### 3.2 Results of the survey

The detailed results of the enquiry are set out in each of the three papers. The implications of our findings are debated within a set of Discussion Points at the end of each report. A copy of each of the Discussion Points can be found in the Appendices to this Summary. The key findings are summarised below

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>%age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of students</td>
<td>855</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of which Part-time</td>
<td>358</td>
<td>41.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full time</td>
<td>497</td>
<td>58.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>46.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>448</td>
<td>52.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(No response to question)</td>
<td>(7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>432</td>
<td>50.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25+</td>
<td>423</td>
<td>49.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year of study</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numbers in First year</td>
<td>315</td>
<td>36.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second year</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third year</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>34.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intended Qualification</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total studying for HND, HNC</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundation degree</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>36.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>31.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional qualifications/NVQ</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EU/International Students

These students prefer more diversity in the classroom, including the presence of more English students. Students are very keen to learn about ‘British culture’, as this is a key component of their experience of living abroad.

Unlike the EU student sample that either intended to go back to their home countries or seek short-term employment in the UK, the data from International students suggests that a majority intend to return to their homelands either directly after completion of their initial HE course or after further higher study in the UK. Seeking permanent residency in the UK does not seem to be a key priority for either group of students.

Over one-fifth of International students were not satisfied with the support in academic writing and referencing provided by the college. Related to this, approximately half of the International students and nearly a quarter of EU students indicated that they require more support with their English language.

A set of Discussion Points arising from the findings is given at Appendix 1 of this overview report.

Part Time students

Employers support Part Time learners by funding their studies, offering students study time and giving varied levels of work/study flexibility. Unsurprisingly, the decision about where to study is largely determined by the student’s employer if they are in full time work.

Whilst a majority of PT students expressed satisfaction with the support provided by their colleges in a many areas, around one-fifth of the students felt that their course tutors did not always take into account the demands posed by their jobs when allocating work or assignments.

PT students are a particularly heterogeneous group of students. Often seen as just a variant of FT or widening participation students, the diverse nature of their backgrounds, motivations and funding sources is frequently overlooked. Given that this group of students is likely to increase in number as a result of demographic change, we have included a suggested typology of PT students in the Appendix to our more detailed survey report. This may act as a “Thought Starter” to college staff when they are designing and marketing future part time provision.

We have prepared a set of Discussion Points as a result of our findings and these are listed in Appendix 2 to this overview report.

Full Time students

A key finding of our survey is the fact that a high proportion of FT students return to their original college for their HE studies. Whilst they may not do so immediately on completion of their L3 courses, they are likely to consider their previous colleges as providers of their future HE programmes.
The factors that can deter the students from studying FT are broadly financial in nature. High course fees and other associated study costs are the strongest factors affecting student choice to pursue Full Time HE.

More class contact hours and more individual study support from tutors are the strongest factors that can help students to learn better. This is supplemented by the students themselves spending more private study time at the college.

Amongst FT students, the location of the college is the strongest factor underpinning their choice of college, followed by the college being able to offer their preferred HE programme. The survey results suggest that, contrary to popular opinion, friends and family have little influence over a student’s choice of HE institution.

FT HE students do not like to share libraries, academic and social spaces with FE students. Whilst all three survey groups held this view, it was strongest amongst this particular response group.

In broad terms, the experiences of younger (18-24) and mature (25+) FT students are similar or comparable. This suggests that the colleges are offering appropriate levels of support to all age groups and are not providing learning environments exclusively suited to younger students.

First year FT students, despite having paid a higher fee than their peers in the Second or Final years of programmes, are not more likely to consider their courses poor value for money.

A set of Discussion Points concerning the findings from the FT survey is included as Appendix 3.

### 3.3 College Successes

Within the three groups there was a general consensus over a number of points. Whether they were EU, International or Home students, and irrespective of mode of study or intended qualification, the majority of students considered that their college-based HE offered good value for money:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Is your course value for money?</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
<th>%age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>637</td>
<td>74.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>24.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total responses</td>
<td>849</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Similar responses were received to questions concerning the students’ overall experience of the HE:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Your overall experience of HE in an FE college</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
<th>%age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very good</td>
<td>339</td>
<td>39.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfactory</td>
<td>311</td>
<td>36.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsatisfactory</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Poor</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total responses</td>
<td>846</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and whether or not they would recommend their college to family or friends

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Would you recommend the college to family/friends?</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
<th>%age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>518</td>
<td>60.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maybe</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>26.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total responses</td>
<td>846</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Colleges can rightfully claim, therefore, that in difficult financial times they offer value for money. The students that took part in our survey were generally of the view that their experience of college-based HE was Satisfactory or Very Good and most would recommend their college to their family or friends. Only 7.9% considered their experience to be Very Poor or Unsatisfactory.

Students were asked why they chose to study at a particular college. The chart below is based on the Rank 1 assigned to the options open to them by Full Time, Part Time, International and EU students. Some of the survey options were offered exclusively to certain groups, for instance, employer insistence was only included in the PT student survey and ‘I have studied here previously’ was only included in FT survey. The European- ERASMUS exchange was only included in the European student survey.

Location was the strongest factor underpinning a student’s choice of college. This is followed by their preferred course being offered by the institution. Employer choice ranks high, although this was only indicated by PT students.
Students, particularly Full Time students, were generally content with their mode of study. This suggests that most had taken a considered decision about the most appropriate route to the qualification of their choice, albeit that 25% of PT students would have preferred the opportunity to study on a fulltime basis.
Part Time and Full Time students were asked to tell us what changes to their course delivery would help them to learn better. Again, a clear consensus emerged between the two groups, as the Figures 3 and 4 below illustrate:
The above figures are based on the Rank 1 allocated by the FT and PT students to the list of factors that can help them to learn better. It is notable that Part Time students rated ‘more time away from work’ as the key factor, suggesting that it may be helpful for college staff to ensure that employers are aware of the demand that an HE programme will make on their employees. A large proportion of PT students are in full time employment and they balance their full time jobs with their PT studies. This option was not included in the FT survey: however, nearly a third of Full Time students (30%) confirmed that they work for over 16 hours per week.

It is also noteworthy that whilst both the groups rated ‘more class contact hours’ and ‘more individual study support from tutors’ highly, a larger proportion of FT students rated these as the most important factor, compared to the PT students.

We have noted in the separate reports for each of these groups that a clear preference remains for increased access to a teacher and for more private study time. As we will see later in this report, college students value their teachers - they have little interest in more distance learning or other self-study methods. It appears that students value contact with a ‘real person’ and with fellow learners rather than through online learning. The link between increasing fees and high expectations around contact time was a strong one in all three surveys, with some students voicing their concerns through their additional comments that a higher level of fee was not necessarily being matched with more taught hours or tutorials.
This point is an interesting one. Our survey results support a conclusion that emerges from a number of other enquiries\textsuperscript{4}, namely that students have an incomplete understanding of the changes to the way in which HE is now funded. (In particular, the withdrawal of HEFCE teaching grant for most courses and students and the reliance on student fees for the full cost of delivery.) Whilst it can be argued that it isn’t necessary for undergraduates to have a detailed grasp of the English HE funding system, much of the potential discontent is born from an assumption on the student’s part that the entire tuition fee is directed towards teaching time. There is little recognition of the fact that other components of the HE offer have to be funded from the same fee income.

Students value their teachers. When Part Time and Full Time students were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statements “My teachers are supportive” and “My teachers are up to date with their subjects” the following responses were received:

\textit{Figure 5. My teachers are supportive}

\textsuperscript{4} E.g. Examining the potential impact of full tuition fees on mature part-time students in English higher education. Angela Shaw, Journal of Further and Higher Education 2013.
Both groups were asked if they agreed with the statement "My teachers are good teachers" and "My teachers are enthusiastic about their subjects."

**Figure 6.** My teachers are up to date with their subject

**Figure 7.** My teachers are good teachers
All three groups were keen to voice their support for their teaching staff. A typical comment is: “I really enjoy studying at a nearby well-resourced site. Most of my teachers have brilliant and dynamic teaching styles which keep the lessons fresh and enjoyable!

These areas are aspects of HE in FE which colleges should rightly celebrate. Students value the process of being taught. Previous studies by MEG\(^5\) have illustrated the fact that HE teaching staff see themselves primarily as teachers, clearly moving from an inductive to a deductive approach across the First year of undergraduate study. Most were aware that being an HE student carries with it the expectation of independent enquiry, as this comment illustrated:

“I feel that giving the student the knowledge to then go and develop their own thinking is an essential part of HE teaching. Being the facilitator in the gaining of knowledge not the dictator of knowledge is key as dictation does not develop free thinkers – they won’t develop themselves or the field they work in.”

3.4 Other aspects to consider

Some areas of college provision raised sufficient variability amongst student responses that they are worthy of discussion here.

(a) The HE culture offered within an FE college

Foremost amongst these is the nature of the HE environment that can be provided in an overwhelmingly FE setting. Our survey asked for responses to

---

\(^5\) Inspiring Individuals MEG 2012
two statements which aimed to tease out what HE students thought of their co-location with FE students, many of whom are significantly younger than themselves. The statements were:

*I would prefer to have a separate library for higher education students*
*The college should have separate academic and social spaces for HE students*

A high proportion of all of the four student groups within our survey indicated their preference for a separate learning and resource centre for HE students. Full Time students held particularly strong views: 66% voiced their preference for a separate library. 50% of Part Time students shared this view, perhaps reflecting less time spent on campus and thus in a shared setting. A similar proportion of International students (51%) preferred a separate library. EU students were less concerned - 42% expressed a wish for separate provision.

The second of these two questions provoked higher levels of response, with a notable proportion of all students confirming their preference for separate academic and social facilities for HE students. Again, a larger proportion of FT students (77%) indicated their preference for separate facilities in comparison to PT students (53.2%). Amongst International and EU students, many more International students (61%) preferred to have separate spaces in contrast with EU students (48%).

In broad terms, therefore, it appears that HE students have a strong preference for facilities that are exclusive to the college’s HE community. Most do not wish to share libraries and other areas with FE students.
Figure 9. I would prefer to have a separate library for higher education students
Figure 10. The college should have separate academic and social spaces for HE students

One Full-Time student summed up the feeling of many by saying: “At present we have to use the same college as the 16-18 year old age group and this presents a multitude of problems. It is annoying when you do have some time during the day to use the library and you can’t find a computer because they are being used for Facebook and some social networking suites. Or you’re trying to work in the “silent study” area and people are chatting loudly on mobile phones or just messing about.”

The responses to these two statements suggest that the need for a distinctive identity is a powerful force amongst HE students. Where the nature of the estate permits, a number of colleges have relocated their HE from within the subject departments to specific, often purpose-built, HE Centres. The practical manifestation of QAA’s expectations around a culture of HE may be easier to illustrate via a separate HE Centre, albeit that for many staff remaining located in the subject centre reflects simple practicalities over the use of college buildings.

Many teachers of Higher Education in colleges also teach Further Education courses, thus reinforcing a practical basis for an integrated approach. There is also an argument to be made for raising awareness and promoting progression opportunities to FE students. In this view, maintaining self-awareness and good behaviour in a shared resource is a separate priority which is seen as a more general, college-wide expectation that is applicable to students of all types.

(b) The social aspects of studying HE in FE

A traditional view of undergraduate education is that it is usually undertaken on a Full-time basis and involves living away from home. In that setting the university campus often becomes the focus of student social life and the Student Union assumes a dual role of provider of entertainment and potentially, pastoral care. We asked our college-based Part-time and Full-time respondents to comment on two statements:

I make use of the college's sporting facilities

The college forms an important part of my social life

Full-time students were also asked for their views on Student Unions: There is a Students Union which plays a big part in my College experience.

The results were noteworthy and possibly contrary to common perceptions of the Full Time student lifestyle. Whilst those who were progressing from FE to HE were marginally more likely than new entrants to FT HE to regard the college as an important part of their social life and to use the sports facilities, the numbers were low. 44% regarded the college as a key element in their social lives compared to only 27.5% of new entrants. However, neither group of Full Time students regard the Student Union as an important part of their HE experience – 72% of continuing
students (who, it could be argued, were more attuned to student lifestyles) said that the SU was not important to them. This rose to 83% amongst new entrants to HE.

These results are perhaps related to the main reason why students choose HE in FE. It is close to their home and their local communities and does not require a change to a traditional “university student” lifestyle. Family links and other local support systems are important and available. Many college students are older than their university campus-based peers and do not look to the college to provide the framework for their social or recreational activities.

![Figure 11. I make use of the college’s sporting facilities](image1)

![Figure 12. The college forms an important part of my social life](image2)
One of the few questions common to all three groups concerned Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance. Respondents were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement “I can get good and impartial careers advice and guidance at the college.”

FT students seem to be more satisfied with this provision than PT students. Nearly 64% of FT students feel they can get good-quality support and guidance in comparison with 32% of PT students. However, to put this in perspective, 48% of PT students neither agreed nor disagreed, suggesting that fewer PT students use these facilities or that they are perhaps less aware of such services provided by the college.

(c) Students’ views on their overall experience of HE in an FE college.

The group responses to this area of the survey showed that PT students are relatively more satisfied with their overall college experience than other student groups. 79.3% of PT students rated their overall experience to be very good or satisfactory, compared to 72.5% of FT students. Although the numbers of International and EU students were small, all International students rated their
experience to be average or above average. Only 1 EU student rated their experience to be below average.

Figure 144  Students’ views of their overall HE in FE experience

As we saw earlier in this report, students generally perceive their colleges to offer good value for money. Further analysis reveals that, having rated their overall experience highly, PT students also considered that what they received in return for their fees represented good value. 77% answered yes when asked if the college offered good value for money, compared to 72% of FT students.
A similar pattern emerged to the question of whether or not students would recommend their college to their families or friends. Whilst 58.5% of FT students said that they would, a higher percentage (62.8%) of PT students confirmed that they would recommend their college. The strongest vote of all came from the EU students, however - 66.6% of this group would recommend the college to a friend or family member.
In conclusion, PT students, many of whom are funded by their employers, think highly of their college offer. Whilst two colleges and three courses were over-represented in this particular group, it could be assumed that the PT students were reasonably hard judges – they were combining study with work and a range of family and financial commitments, so were likely to have a clear view over the perceived value of their college HE courses.

3.5 Potential areas for review

(a) Addressing the perceptions that older students have of HE in FE.

As noted in the introductory section to our overview, we carried out a separate analysis of the responses of older Full Time students to a number of questions that could broadly be described as seeking their views on the pastoral support available to them.

Most seem to be satisfied with the arrangements that are in place at their colleges. This suggests that colleges are meeting the needs of a diverse student group. The majority of students in any FE college are under the age of 25 but our results suggest that colleges are not overly-focused on the needs of this younger age group. The only notable feature was a slightly lower inclination on the part of mature students to discuss a problem with a tutor, but this may reflect easier access to other sources of advice such as family members or friends.
However, college staff may still wish to review the nature of the support that they make available to those over the age of 25. Burton et al (2011) noted that positive initial contact and on-going support mechanisms were considered the most influential factors in the retention of mature students. Given that the majority population in any college is aged 16-24, it is understandable that pastoral support may tend to be tailored to the needs and preferences of this younger age group. However, as a declining birth rate begins to impact on college intakes, further review of these arrangements may be needed if colleges are to continue to recruit and retain mature students.

(b) Addressing a lack of focus on the needs of European Union students

Our survey of the experiences of EU and International students led us to note that 93% of International students seem to be satisfied with the clarity of programme aims and structures when compared to EU students (79%). 98% of International students find their courses interesting when compared to EU students, and they were relatively more convinced than EU students that their course was preparing them well for their chosen career. 85% of International students (compared to 67% EU students) were convinced that that their teachers are generally well-informed about their subjects. Only 5% of International students considered that teaching styles in their home countries were better than in England, compared to 25% of EU students.

These findings, albeit from a small group of EU and International students, suggest that colleges work hard to meet the needs of International students. This is understandable for a number of reasons – their students are not unaware that they are charged a substantially higher fee in comparison to Home students. They will have high expectations in return for their money, which colleges endeavour to meet. Some will come with very different educational experiences to those usually found in Western Europe and others will have need of extra tuition in order to improve their English language skills. Colleges are generally able to rise to these challenges.

What appears to be less developed is an awareness of the perceptions of EU students. This group has less of a historic tie with English HE qualifications than International students, is able to access free or significantly-cheaper HE in their home countries and could access English-medium HE in a number of European universities. Whilst the prestige associated with an English HE qualification still applies to this group, it cannot be taken for granted. Their interest in meeting other undergraduates in other countries and the value they attach to broadening cultural horizons through study abroad could as easily be addressed by study in another European country.

---

6 Barriers to learning for mature students studying HE in an FE college. Journal of Further and Higher Education.
(c) Value for money

A number of the Full and Part time students in our survey felt strongly about the value for money offered by their courses. We were aware that many of the students in these groups were in their First year and had thus entered HE during the year in which fee levels increased significantly. We wanted to find out if these students are more demanding of their colleges than those who are in their Second or Final years (and have paid lower fees.) We focused our research on First year Full Time students. Full details are given in the Addendum to the Full Time report which can be found at mixedeconomygroup.co.uk

The First year group was the first cohort of HE students to experience the new funding arrangements. As such their views may be coloured by the national debate that is going on around them concerning both the level of HE fees and the payment mechanism chosen by Government. Their responses must thus be considered as early indicators, to be tested as the new system develops. However, from these early responses it may be concluded that:

- Students may become increasingly concerned at the value their qualification carries in the job market
- They will seek “value for money” defined in terms of good teaching, effective support and success rate
- They expect their course to be well-organised and adapted to meet students’ needs

In return, students come prepared for study and expect to work hard.

4. Summary

Prior to this survey, relatively little attention has been paid to the student experience of HE in FE. Whilst this study confirms many of the points made in MEG’s earlier enquiry it also illustrates the growing focus placed on value for money by students.

The key points emerging from our survey are set out earlier in this report. What do these mean for colleges that offer HE? We offer some thoughts in our Discussion Points at the end of each paper, copied here as Appendices to our Summary report. These offer a strategic view of the impact of our findings and are aimed at college managers, university partners, BIS officials and employers. At a more pragmatic level, college teaching staff should note:

More class contact hours and more individual study support from their tutors are the strongest factors identified by students when they are asked to identify what will help them to learn better. Students chose to study at a college because they felt they would get more support than they would on a similar course at a university. This unique selling proposition should be nurtured by colleges.

7 ibid
Amongst FT students, there is a clear tendency for students to return to a previous college for their HE. Colleges may consider channelling their marketing resources to attracting back their former students within few years after the completion of their FE. studies.

College location is the strongest factor underpinning the choice of college for FT students. Whilst it is commonly believed that students select their institutions based on where their friends study, all the groups in our survey indicated that neither friends nor family are influential in their decision making.

The factors that can deter the students from studying FT are broadly financial in nature. Colleges should therefore remain conscious of local fee-sensitivities and bear this in mind when considering any significant fee increases.

HE Students would prefer libraries, academic and social spaces that are dedicated to HE students. The ability of each college to provide exclusive facilities may be restricted because of the nature of the estate or by resourcing or philosophical issues. However, our research suggests that shared resources are an area of dissatisfaction for HE students.

Around one-fifth of the students felt that their course tutors did not always take into account the demands imposed by their workplace. Colleges can develop or improve this aspect of their course delivery through closer collaboration with employers.

Employers support part-time learners through funding their studies. Although it may be obvious to say it, the recruitment and retention of PT students can be heavily influenced by the level of support they receive from their employers and their college tutors. Colleges can benefit by taking steps to strengthen their links with local businesses.

Approximately half of the International students and nearly a quarter of EU students indicated that they require more support with their English language. Colleges can help provide a better learning experience for these students by looking at ways of increasing the support available for English language proficiency, as well as with developing academic writing and referencing skills.

International and EU Students prefer to have more diversity in the classroom including the presence of more English students. Colleges need to plan their curriculum offer so that HE programmes attract a range of nationalities and cultures. International students are valued for the income that they bring to colleges as well as the cultural diversity that they themselves offer to some regions. In return, they have certain expectations about the English HE experience that they will have in exchange for the high fee that they pay.

International students indicate a preference to go on to further study beyond an HND or first degree. Colleges can therefore offer guidance and support to students when they are considering the options available to them once they have completed their initial HE studies. This can happen irrespective of whether or not the college offers Post-graduate qualifications.
Student Unions in FE colleges and partner universities may wish to review the implications of the importance attached to their activities by college-based HE students. Whilst the social function of the Student Union may be of less interest to older, home-based HE students, the role of the student representative on subject boards is likely to be of increasing importance to the wider HE student community as a result Higher Education Review.

Engagement with NSS amongst college-based HE students remains low and there is a role for the SU in encouraging participation in this exercise. It may be useful for college staff and Student Unions to explore how well students understand the more general representational role of the Union as opposed to its social function.

5. Conclusion

Previous studies by the Mixed Economy Group\(^8\) have identified the value placed by students on good quality teaching and sustained contact with teachers as an important and potentially distinctive feature of studying HE in a college setting. This is confirmed in the views expressed in this current survey. At a time when all providers are required to put “Students at the heart of the system” the responses gathered in 2013 demonstrate that students themselves are recognising this. They articulate what they want from their studies, what they believe their college should provide and what they expect a higher level qualification to do for them in both the immediate job market and as a foundation for their career.

Care must therefore be taken to ensure that what is currently a distinctive feature of college-based HE (high contact hours, good teaching and a relevant curriculum) is not swept away in a drive for commercial benefit in a difficult funding period.

A recent survey of the university student experience\(^9\) notes that many of the universities which score highly are taking steps to reduce class sizes and improve their assessment and feedback processes. The college sector can take heart from such imitation - but should not rest on its laurels.

Colleges have always believed that their focus on high quality teaching and learning, coupled with a curriculum which is relevant to the world of work, responds directly to what students and their supporters want. This proposition can only be sustained if the student voice is clear and colleges not only listen but act on what that voice tells them.

\(^8\) Strategic Options, Operational challenges. MEG 2010
\(^9\) THE Student Experience Survey 2013
Appendix 1

The experiences of International/EU students studying HE in English Further Education Colleges.

Discussion Points.

For colleges which offer HE in FE

Is the recruitment of International and EU students a strategic priority for your college? If so, how are you managing resources and activities to support that strategy? In particular:

- Are you aware of the current UK Visas and Immigration Service procedures surrounding the admission of International students to the UK? Is this reflected in your information to potential applicants?
- Does your college have the systems and procedures required to satisfy compliance with Highly Trusted Status? How do you monitor this?
- Have you considered the level and sensitivity of the fee charged to International students? Would student numbers be affected by a change in fees?
- Are International students a significant part of the student community and if so have you considered what different or additional support needs they may have? Can such support be provided on an individual basis?
- Do you provide appropriate facilities and support for your International students e.g. assistance with housing, dedicated pastoral or related support?
- Can your college support and educate staff, such that they understand the cultural sensitivities that they will encounter when dealing with International and/or EU students?
- Does the level of academic support offered help both groups of students to succeed?
- In addition to the high academic standards and quality of learning experience your students will expect, have you provided opportunities for them to gain a wider knowledge or experience of life in the UK?
- Are you fully informed about EU programmes such as Erasmus, Leonardo da Vinci, Grundtvig and Jean Monet? Are you familiar with the Lifelong Learning policies of the European Commission’s Directorate General for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth?
- Is the blend of nationalities in your HE classes as balanced as it can be? Does it enable EU/International students to mix with English students and build networks and friendships outside the classroom?
- Are you taking the opportunities offered by having students from outside the UK to broaden your curriculum with a global context?

For BIS

- Is the potential for growth in International student numbers HE in FE recognised and supported? Are there any barriers to that growth?
- Is there any potential to apply consistent and equitable rules to colleges and universities which recruit International students?
- What are the implications of European HE policies on the HE in FE sector? Can these expectations be delivered under current funding arrangements?
- How does the UK engage in the current debate within the EU about employability, mobility and higher-level skills?
- How might the UK engage with the European Commission to increase the numbers of EU students recruited to higher-level vocational courses offered in FE colleges?

For partner HEIs

- Will partner colleges be supported in their efforts to recruit International students? Is this seen as a welcome development or as unwanted competition?
- Do you propose to involve your college partners in any research projects that you may undertake which are aimed at understanding the needs and expectations of EU/International students?
- What involvement do you currently have with EU students? How does this impact on your institution’s academic and pastoral arrangements for your own and your partner college(s) EU students?
Appendix 2

The experiences of Part Time students studying HE in English FE Colleges

Discussion Points

For Colleges

A suggested typology of Part Time students is included below to assist colleges in their planning processes.

With regards to your Part Time HE provision, whether prescribed or non-prescribed:

- How are classroom delivery and the quality of the student learning experience assessed? Are teachers delivering HE formally observed in the classroom?
- Is the course organised to suit the needs of Part Time learners e.g. does it take into account family responsibilities when timing assessments, particularly around holiday periods?
- Is student feedback timely and suited to the tighter time constraints under which Part Time students work?
- Is sufficient attention paid to course organisation? Are changes to course organisation affecting students explained to them?
- Are staff changes or absences adequately managed?
- Are learning resources including library stock accessible to PT students who may wish to access them at times convenient to them?
- Are there sufficient resources to deliver a high quality PT course?
- Are the different learning and social expectations of PT students taken into account?
- Is the level of fee set at a level which both attracts students and guarantees sufficient resource for quality course delivery and resourcing?
- Does your PT offer have a distinctive organisation and delivery that is suited to the needs of your students?
- Are PT courses seen as programmes in their own right rather than a subset of Full Time equivalents?

For BIS

- If fee levels are a significant disincentive for participation in Part Time study what can be done to counter this? Are there fiscal or other financial incentives which could encourage individuals or businesses to support part time study?
- Is the importance of PT study to economic development and business success recognised appropriately? Is there an appropriate balance between the number of Full and Part Time students?
- Are there appropriate incentives to encourage innovative approaches to higher level skills in the workplace including Higher Apprenticeships?

For Employers

- Have you considered the benefits of higher level study for your employees and your business?
• Do you make appropriate arrangements to support employees engaging in Part Time study (paying costs, giving, study time etc.)?

For HEIs
• Do your validation systems and partnership arrangements recognise the role and importance of Part Time study in college delivered HE?
• If PT provision is given lesser priority by your institution, have you considered how, working in partnership with colleges, these opportunities can be preserved?
• Have you identified progression opportunities to post graduate study for Part Time students?

A suggested typology of Part Time HE students
Students studying on a Part Time basis are a heterogeneous group. Their motivations for study are varied. Some are sent to study by their employers whilst others support their own studies to aid career development. A smaller proportion study purely out of personal interest.

Whatever the reason for their studies it is increasingly apparent that PT courses cannot be seen simply as a lesser dimension of an equivalent Full Time course. Part Time students have distinctive needs and expectations which this typology begins to define. Colleges will of course have their own analysis of the PT students who attend their institutions. The outline presented below is intended to act as a stimulus for thought and to assist colleges in putting the needs of these students at the centre of what they do.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment status</th>
<th>Employer support</th>
<th>Payment responsibility</th>
<th>Reason for study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employed FT</td>
<td>Time to attend college</td>
<td>Employer</td>
<td>Required for job role/ licence to practice. Employer has direct interest in outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed FT</td>
<td>Time to attend college</td>
<td>Student/employer</td>
<td>Career progression but not directly related to current role. Financial responsibility thus shared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed FT</td>
<td>No time from employer. Not related to job role or career with that employer but seen as personal development</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Personal development. Career change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed PT</td>
<td>No time from employer. Study fits alongside work</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Career enhancement. Student may see a balance between non graduate employment and study as a means to an end</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not in work</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Student/state</td>
<td>Career enhancement or return to the labour market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Social/personal. May also have an interest in supporting voluntary roles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 3

The experiences of Full Time students studying HE in English FE Colleges

Discussion Points

For Colleges

Does your Full time HE offer have a distinctive organisation and delivery that is suited to the needs of your students?

- How are classroom delivery and the quality of the student learning experience assessed?
- Is the course organised to suit the needs of learners e.g. does it take into account family responsibilities when timing assessments, particularly around holiday periods?
- Is student feedback timely and suited to the tighter time constraints under which many more mature students work?
- Is sufficient attention paid to course administration? Are changes to course organisation which affect students explained to them?
- When does flexibility become lack of organisation?
- Are staff changes or absences adequately managed?
- Are learning resources including library stock adequate and accessible to students who may wish to use them at times convenient to them?
- Are the different learning and social expectations of students taken into account?
- Are there sufficient resources to deliver a high quality course?
- Is the fee set at a level which both attracts students and guarantees sufficient resource for quality course delivery and resourcing?

For BIS

- If fee levels are a significant disincentive for participation in higher-level study for some groups of students, what can be done to counter this?
- Is the contribution made to economic development and business success by older students returning to study recognised appropriately?
- Is there an appropriate balance between the number of Full and Part Time students?
- Are there appropriate incentives to encourage innovative approaches to higher level skills in the workplace including Higher Apprenticeships and blended learning?

For Employers

- Do your recruitment policies recognise the potential benefits of employing local people with higher level qualifications?
- Do you encourage those you employ to build on their higher level qualifications?