



ASSOCIATION
OF COLLEGES

Higher Education Survey

Views of members on topical HE matters

23 July 2018

Association of Colleges

The Association of Colleges (AoC) represents nearly 93% of the 269 colleges in England incorporated under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992.

Colleges are transformational – they help people to make the most of their talents and ambitions and drive social mobility; they help businesses improve productivity and drive economic growth; they are rooted in and committed to their communities and drive tolerance and well-being. They are an essential part of England’s education system.

Colleges provide academic, technical and professional education for young people, adults and employers. Nearly 200 FE colleges teach Higher Education (HE) to approximately 150,000 students.

Key findings from the AoC HE survey

AoC recently conducted a survey on HE that was circulated to our members through a variety of channels. The survey presented an opportunity to our members to offer their views on a number of current HE related matters at colleges. Circa 200 colleges offer HE in England and 59 (30 percent) colleges took part in the survey. The survey was administered online (in April 2018) through survey monkey and in addition to a series of closed questions, the survey included a range of open-ended questions to enable the respondents to offer further comments and explanations to the questions posed in the survey.

Only one response is included per college and the survey has been completed by HE leaders and managers at colleges. The survey captures views of our members on topical HE matters and the responses to the survey questions and the key messages from the survey are presented below.

We are grateful to those who took the time and interest in completing the survey. These responses will help inform our approaches in voicing the interests and concerns of our members relating to college HE.

Participating colleges

Colleges that took part in the survey include general FECs, Sixth Form Colleges and Specialist Colleges. As indicated in the tables below, colleges from each region of England participated in the survey.

College type	Number of responses
General further education college	49
Sixth form college	6
Specialist college (land-based, art & design, specialist designated)	4
Total	59

Region	Number of responses
Eastern region	2
East Midlands	6
London	3
North East	6
North West	11
South East	14
South West	4
West Midlands	9
Yorkshire and the Humber	4
Total	59

Number of HE students

Respondents were asked to provide the number of HE students at their colleges and their responses are summarised in the table below. A majority of colleges (62 percent) included in the survey had less than 500 students (in headcount terms) studying courses of Prescribed HE or Higher and Degree Level apprenticeships.

Number of students (Headcount) in 2017/18	Number of colleges	Percent
Less than 100	5	8%
100-299	25	42%
300-499	7	12%
500-699	10	17%
700-999	9	16%
More than 1000	3	5%
Total	59	100%

Respondents provided data on HE student numbers for 2016/17 and 2017/18, and the change in the student numbers is depicted in the table below. 15 percent colleges experienced a decline in student numbers of 50 students or more. Such decline is significant for all colleges, but more so for smaller colleges. On the other hand, 10 percent participating colleges witnessed a growth in HE student numbers of 50 students or more from 2016/17 to 2017/18. It would be informative to understand longer term patterns in HE student recruitment at colleges, however, this was beyond the scope of this exercise.

Change in the number of students (Headcount) from 2016/17 to 2017/18	Number of colleges	Percent
Decline \geq 100	4	7%
Decline of 50-99	5	8%
Decline of 1-49	19	32%
No change	2	3%
Increase 1-49	23	40%
Increase 50-99	2	3%
Increase \geq 100	4	7%
Total	59	100%

Unconditional offers

Unconditional offers made by universities and colleges have recently caught the attention of critics and policy makers. Unconditional offers have intensified competition amongst providers and whether these are in the interests of students is very much debatable. AoC is keen to develop an informed view on the subject and the survey sought views of colleges whether these offers have impacted on the recruitment at colleges and whether these offers should be banned.

While universities are known to make unconditional offers, these are made by colleges as well. Of the 59 colleges that took part in the survey, 22 colleges (37 percent) made unconditional offers to their HE applicants.

Does the college make unconditional offers to its HE applicants?	Number of responses	Percent
Yes	22	37%
No	37	63%
Total	59	100%

The 22 colleges that said 'yes' explained their reasons for making such offers. It appears that colleges are largely making unconditional offers to mature students who meet the entry criteria. In the main, a majority of these colleges were making offers to students who already had the necessary qualifications.

"But only to applicants who already meet the entry requirements. We do not offer unconditional offers to any student yet to achieve qualifications."

"Many of our applicants are returners to education who have industry experience or who already have qualifications. We give unconditional offers to our own staff applying for our Diploma in Education."

"... The College does not make 'unconditional' offers to students who are pending grades. We are experiencing HEIs that are offering such unconditional places and finding that this impacts negatively on our level 3 students as, though capable of achieving high grades, do not have the incentive to do so."

"The main driver for conditional offers being made is when the student meets all of the entry criteria as many of our part-time students are coming back into education so already hold the necessary qualifications."

The offers are made following a face to face interview the tutors using their professional judgement, free writing exercise and BKSB, if necessary."

Recruitment at a majority of colleges (62 percent of those who responded to the question) seems to be affected by unconditional offers made by other universities/colleges.

Were the college's enrolments in 2017/18 affected by unconditional offers made by other universities/colleges?	Number of responses	Percent
Yes	36	62%
No	22	38%
Total	58	100%

Survey respondents further elaborated on the impact of unconditional offers made by universities, both on the outcomes for students as well as on college recruitment. Some respondents perceived that it was likely that enrolments at colleges were negatively affected by the unconditional offers made by universities/colleges however they specified that they did not have evidence to support this.

Unconditional offers appear to be detrimental to student achievement because students do not have the motivation to achieve high grades once they have a secure place at a university. Some respondents also shared instances where students did not even complete their level 3 qualification after they had received an unconditional offer.

"Unconditional offers were made by several HEIs to students despite them not being in possession of appropriate Level 3 qualifications. This was evidenced internally with college students being offered unconditional places prior to L3 course completion, which impacted internal progression to CBHE. This practice has a demotivating effect on students as they do not need to achieve high grades at L3 to progress which and had an impact on college L3 success."

"Art and Design programmes in particular were affected by offers from local HEIs. In some instances the students lost motivation to finish their level 3 programme."

Unconditional offers are negatively impacting on College HE recruitment. Colleges are losing potential applicants to universities and one college respondent expressed disappointment because the college had to close some of the programmes because of the reduced demand which was attributed to the students taking up the unconditional offers. Unconditional offers are believed to have a spiral effect on recruitment at all providers and low tariff providers are adversely affected by more aggressive recruitment strategies of high and medium tariff providers.

“Enrolments on programmes have significantly reduced due to our level 3 feeder students being offered unconditional offers at other Universities. 3 FT programmes have closed over the last 3 years and another is likely to close this year. Reports from students on feeder groups indicate this is due to them being offered unconditional offers elsewhere.”

“It can be seen that the increase in Unconditional offers from universities has a downward pressure on the pool of typical CHE applicants. Initially, unconditional offer from HEI's for applicants still pursuing L3 qualifications was based on prediction and forecast of L3 outcome. However, within a marketised sector the trickle down effect of this is that that it became a strategy through which to secure recruitment at all costs. Ultimately, providers whose entry requirements are generally lower lose out.”

Almost all respondents indicated that AoC should support a ban on unconditional offers for younger students.

Some national organisations are pressing for a ban on unconditional offers for younger students. Should AoC support this?	Number of responses	Percent
Yes	55	96%
No	2	4%
Total	57	100%

It is interesting to note that of the 22 colleges that currently make some unconditional offers (majority of colleges were making such offers to mature students/those who met the eligibility criteria), 20 indicated that they would like AoC to support the ban on unconditional offers for younger students. Only one of the 22 colleges responded 'No' and one respondent did not respond to the

question. Respondents qualified their stance by outlining the unintended negative impact of unconditional offers on young people.

"I support unconditional offers given where the student has industry experience, but younger students who are studying a qualification to gain the published UCAS points, should be encouraged to actually achieve that qualification. We have had a number of FE students give up on their qualification because they feel that they don't need to do it."

Another respondent commented that it is not appropriate to support a ban based on age because some younger students may have already met the entry requirements and that there should be much clearer guidance around what constitutes an unconditional offer (applicant has already met the entry requirements) vs unconditional (applicant has yet to meet the entry requirements).

Tuition fees

The survey sought a picture on colleges that had access agreements in place to gather whether they were charging higher fee for some or all of their courses, the average tuition fee charged by the college, and whether the colleges were revising (or intended to revise) their tuition fees strategies.

Do you currently have an access agreement in place?	Number of responses	Percent
Yes	23	39%
No	36	61%
Total	59	100%

A majority of the responding colleges (61 percent) did not have an access agreement in place. In 2017/18, 75 out of approximately 200 FE colleges (app 38 percent) that teach HE had access agreements approved by OFFA. In other words, approximately 60 percent colleges do not charge the higher fee for all of their HE courses. So, the sample broadly mirrors the wider picture of colleges that charge higher fee for at least one of their courses.

The average fee charged by colleges for a majority of their FT prescribed HE courses varied from £4,000 to £9,250. As indicated in the table below, 36 out of 57 colleges indicated that their average tuition fee was in the range £ 4,000-£6,000. It is noteworthy that 6 out of these 36 colleges had access agreements in

place, which suggests that despite charging higher fee for some of their courses, these colleges charged lower fee for most of their programmes.

“The College is in the process of transition from a franchised partnership to a validated partnership arrangement for 2018/19 entrants. While the College will charge a higher fee of £8500 for a small proportion of its courses and top-up degrees, the majority of students will be enrolled on 2-year foundation degree awards at £6150.”

The fee charged for full time prescribed HE programmes also varies based on the subject areas with higher fee charged for STEM programmes. There is also a variation in fee charged for programmes validated by different universities.

What is the average tuition fee charged by the college for a majority of its full-time Prescribed HE programmes?	Number of responses	Percent
> £4000 and < £5000	8	14%
= £5000 and < £6000	16	27%
= £6000	12	20%
> £6000 and < £7000	11	19%
>= £7000 and <£8000	5	9%
>=£8000 and <£9000	2	3%
>=£9000	3	5%
No response	2	3%
Total	59	100%

Respondents also supplied information for the part time fee charged by their colleges, however, this is less straightforward to analyse because it varies based on the number of credits studied by part time students per year. 14 colleges (out of 44 that responded) indicated a pro-rata fee of up to £ 3,000 for their part time courses.

Those that charge lower fee for their full time prescribed HE provision may be revisiting their fee strategies and some respondents attributed this to the competition and OfS fees.

“The College ensures that fees are competitive and remain value for money due to our recruitment of students from the widening participation agenda. However, these will need to be reviewed following the implementation of the OfS fee from 2019-20 academic year.”

“with the extra costs of future registration with the OFS, Jisc, OIA, QAA and other factors such as EPA in higher and degree apprenticeships the fees that the college charge are being reviewed currently where we expect to have an access agreement and put up HE fees.”

College mergers also appear to be a factor for colleges to revisit their tuition fees. One of the respondents indicated that post-merger the college decided to lower the tuition fee for its HN provision to establish parity across the different campuses.

Have you made any recent changes (or intend to make any changes) to the tuition fee for Prescribed HE programmes?	Number of responses	Percent
Yes	28	48%
No	30	52%
Total	58	100%

College fee may also become subject to revision because of changes to the fee charged by validating HEIs and comments from some respondents reflected this. Some comments also highlighted the fee increase in line with participation in TEF. One respondent specifically commented on the permissibility of a gradual increase in fees because of the insensitivity of students towards price.

“Since the new fee regime was introduced, the College has slowly increased its fees from £5,950 to £7,500. We are intending to raise tuition fees for 2019-2020 as the fee appears to have little impact on recruitment, due to the student loan process.”

Higher and Degree level apprenticeships

Nearly 88 percent participating colleges either already deliver or are currently planning to offer higher level apprenticeships. However, there is a relatively weaker uptake of Degree apprenticeships amongst colleges.

Does the college offer Higher Level apprenticeships?	Number of responses	Percent
Yes	41	69%
No	7	12%
Not currently, but planning to offer	11	19%
Total	59	100%

Does the college offer degree apprenticeships?	Number of responses	Percent
Yes	10	17%
No	25	42%
Not currently, but planning to offer	24	41%
Total	59	100%

7 colleges that currently do not deliver apprenticeships plan to deliver both higher level and degree level apprenticeships. 17 of the 41 colleges that currently deliver higher level apprenticeships are currently planning to deliver degree apprenticeships as well. Only 9 of the 59 colleges indicated that they currently deliver both higher level and degree level apprenticeships.

Has the growth from degree apprenticeships by others affected the college's higher education enrolments or higher level apprenticeship provision?	Number of responses	Percent
Yes	8	15%
No	46	85%
Total	54	100%

There is no clear evidence to suggest that the growth from degree apprenticeships by other providers is affecting the college HE recruitment. Some respondents perceived that while they speculate that growth in degree apprenticeships is likely to affect HE recruitment in the near future, they did not have firm evidence to support these claims. Although the evidence on the subject is patchy, it seems some colleges are optimistic that they will be able to

deliver higher and degree level apprenticeships in conjunction with their university partners, others believed that level 4/5 might be a possible area for growth whereas the opportunities at degree level apprenticeships will be limited for colleges.

Validation

Most colleges (67 percent) that participated in the survey are working in partnership with one or two universities although a notable proportion of colleges (31 percent) work with three or more universities. The question only focussed on partnership with universities rather than delivery of other higher-level qualifications awarded by external awarding bodies.

How many universities currently validate the provision at the college?	Number of responses	Percent
0	1	2%
1	18	31%
2	21	36%
3	7	12%
4	9	16%
5	2	3%
Total	58	100%

It is notable that a large proportion (53 percent) of participating colleges are either planning to or have recently made changes to their validation arrangements.

Is the college planning to (or has it recently) make any changes to its validation arrangements?	Number of responses	Percent
Yes	31	53%
No	28	47%
Total	59	100%

The table below summarises the reasons for these changes. Respondents were allowed to select multiple responses and a significant proportion of colleges that are making changes to validation arrangements attributed this to changes in the colleges' relationship with validating universities. A small number of respondents

also mentioned their plans for FDAP or TDAP as a reason for these changes. Those who indicated 'other' elaborated mergers, 'delivery of higher and degree apprenticeships' and 'reluctance of HEIs to support the delivery of Level 6 provision' as some of the reasons for making changes to their validation arrangements.

If there are changes to the college's validation arrangements that are currently being made, please indicate the reasons for this: (Please tick all that apply)	Number of responses	Percent
Changes in the college's relationship with one or more universities	26	72%
Changes in the college's relationship with Pearson	6	17%
An application for FDAP	2	6%
An application for TDAP	2	6%
Other	12	33%
Total	36	100%

Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF)

58 percent of the responding colleges took part in TEF year 2 or TEF year 3, however, it must be noted that over 130 colleges (nearly 66 percent of colleges that teach HE) have participated in TEF year 2 and TEF year 3.

Has the college taken part in TEF year 2 or TEF year 3?	Number of responses	Percent
Yes	34	58%
No	25	42%
Total	59	100%

Respondents from colleges that have not participated in TEF outlined the reasons for their decisions which included college mergers, lack of confidence in the benefits of participation, insufficient metrics or poor metrics, and some believed that they wanted to observe how TEF would affect student choice and chose to delay this decision during TEF year 2 and TEF year 3.

“Due to priorities of merger and re-structure TEF has not be pursued.”

“Lots of work for little additional value to the College and its recruitment.”

“The College has focused its quality priorities in FE, working towards Ofsted re inspection. There is a TEF implementation plan in place for submission in 2018-19.”

Respondents also commented on aspects of TEF that were dissatisfactory and required improvements. A majority of these reflect the metrics used in TEF that are not favourable for college HE. A lack of resource at colleges in comparison with universities was consistently voiced as a barrier in making robust TEF submissions.

“It is a shame that the NSS is relied on so heavily to determine 'good teaching'. The college has plenty of internal evidence to confirm good teaching but on the basis of the NSS we cannot say teaching is good. Very small cohorts of students complete the NSS and often this represents a very small percentage of overall HE numbers which does not provide an accurate picture.”

“More consideration to foundation degrees that give students the qualification to get a job - yet are not classed as 'graduate' jobs eg teaching assistant or housing officer. More consideration of the student voice. Little consideration is given to the quality of teaching - ironic. Part time Progression / destination data - students do not always progress or get promotors immediately it may take a few years and this is not reflected in the metrics - in fact we are penalised for it.”

“I am not sure that students will understand or value it. The metrics are confusing and the narrative is often subjective.”

“More specific metric for College based HE provision (e.g. include HNC survey data).”

“The limiting number of students included in the TEF due to exclusion of all one year courses (HNC's and top-ups) does not give a full indication of teaching provision at the provider level.”

“I think the guidance and information about what to provide in the TEF submission etc is good. The issue is that this is yet another process which has to be completed and adds to workload. However in terms of QA and raising awareness/ understanding of key statistics it is very good.”

TEF will be mandatory for providers with more than 500 students on higher education courses. Is this of any concern to your college?	Number of responses	Percent
Yes	9	16%
No	48	84%
Total	57	100%

Mandatory participation of providers with more than 500 HE students did not appear to be of concern to most colleges. Some concerns raised by the 16 percent respondents include what could 'non-participation on TEF' signify for those colleges that choose not to enter into TEF. The level of resource required for robust TEF submissions and the administrative burden is of concern to all colleges, but more so for smaller colleges.

TEF will be at a subject level in future. Is this of any concern to your college?	Number of responses	Percent
Yes	26	45%
No	32	55%
Total	58	100%

A number of respondents (45 percent) expressed concerns regarding the implementation of TEF at a subject level. These concerns were mainly in relation to small class sizes and non-reportability of data for colleges. Concerns are also expressed on the value TEF ratings will add for mature and part time student, as well as a lack of resource at colleges to administer subject TEF. For specialist colleges, subject TEF is not expected to add any value beyond provider level TEF.

"issue is the usefulness of subject TEF with very small cohorts - and whether our students would check this out anyway - but our validators will and will put on pressure ..(for better results and may shut underperforming provision when it may be affected by 1 or 2 students..) Our NSS was badly affected by one small cohort who had a tutor on maternity and did not like the replacement - by over 10% for the whole college !!"

Office for Students

The survey invited some comments and views of respondents on the new regulatory framework and registration with the Office for Students. 52 out of 59 respondents responded to this open-ended question.

Some comments highlighted the support offered by the OfS during the registration period and there was some support from respondents for the overarching principles of the regulatory framework.

“Personally value the focus on student engagement and value for money, and believe that FECs will be in a strong position - providing relevant vocational education and training to meet higher level skills gaps and employment. The challenge is whether one size fits all or whether there should be different model applied to CBHE.”

Almost all comments included concerns relating to OfS registration fee that providers will be liable to pay from 2019/20. The comments highlighted the disproportionately high nature of registration costs for smaller providers and the administrative burden of compliance for colleges that have a limited resource for HE. Some comments indicated that the fee will dictate the future viability of HE at their colleges.

“General concern about the initial and ongoing cost of registration with the OfS and other agencies, and how college-based HE providers will adapt to the increased compliance burden.”

“The fees set (by government) will bring into question whether we run any directly funded HE provision as these costs will need to be passed to students in order to make programmes viable.”

“The initial registration process will likely prove challenging to FE colleges as most colleges are managed by one or two individuals. Meeting the conditions of registration will require investment of time, that will likely impact the management of other HE matters at a time when students are approaching the end of their courses.”

Post-18 education and funding review

Lastly, the survey invited some comments and views of respondents on the post-18 education and funding review. These varied in their focus and reflect the

broad nature of the review. While some colleagues view it as an opportunity for a holistic review and call for a need to review a 16-18 education as well, there is an underpinning call for fairer funding for College HE and appropriately rewarding colleges for the contributions they make towards the widening participation agendas. Some select comments from the survey are included for emphases and representation.

“Colleges offer a unique opportunity to non-traditional university level learning which is additional engaging for those from a non-academic background and or cannot move away from home / have caring or economic demands etc . College's should be able to offer level 6 top-ups validated by Pearson without the need to work with a university partner.”

“It is vital that we retain the higher apprenticeship provision as the expectation that all level 3 candidates can attain a level 6 is unrealistic and retention and achievement figures will be severely hit. Employers and apprentices want to maintain either a level 4 or level 5 step off point as qualified technicians.”

“We support the review in order that Colleges are recognised for the contribution they make to the post 18 sector. There is concern over different funding rates for different routes; is it all focussed on STEM for example? The review does not take into account particularly the fact that post 18 is not always around Higher Education. Some students post 18 who do not hold an EHCP still require significant support to achieve, but these don't appear to come under the council. There needs to be acknowledgement that some students just take longer to achieve level 3, however and perversely there is less funding for them when they reach 18. One final plea - protect community learning.”

“FE Colleges play a vital role in widening access to HE and provide value for money. FE Colleges need to be considered on an equal footing to HEIs with regards to funding and resources.”

“Acknowledgment that much of the workforce who would benefit most as a part of their workplace development to positively impact on UK GDP are those least able to afford to invest in themselves.”

“Consider the impact of the fee system on part-time students.”

“Bring back CAP on numbers will resolve issues of unconditional offers.”

"It is heartening to see the Government recently challenge the dominance of the 3 year UG Hons qualification as the only 'valid' HE pathway. We are a long way from parity of esteem between the Hons programme and other L4 or 5 qualifications. The review needs to re-clarify the L4 and L5 offer within the market, particularly in sectors where graduates stand little chance of reaping the benefits of £50k investment in their future careers. A re-brand and relaunch of the Foundation Degree with a title change to replace the word 'Foundation' would be welcomed. Following re-clarification of the market, the primary focus needs to shift to working with employers to better define L5 graduate outcomes and halt the 'graduatisation' of ALL employment. Parity of esteem and 'best interest' groundwork needs to also to be carried out in schools and with IAG teams to ensure that future applicants to HE are made aware of the validity of qualification at L4 and L5 and the benefits both financially and in terms of career progression of the 2 + 1 model offered through the HN and FD routes."

"Consider funding for 19+ this is currently below 16-18 funding yet these students still require a lot of tutorial support Consider raising the £4000 funding for 16-18 as this is very tight Technical Level qualifications - we don't really need additional /further level 4/5 qualifications introducing as we already have NVQ, FD, HND/C, non prescribed HE."

Conclusions and discussion

The survey has been helpful in understanding the perspectives of our members and the responses will help develop and shape AoC's approach to the various HE agendas. In summary, members do not support unconditional offers for young students and feel these do not work in the interest of students or colleges.

The average tuition fee charged by FECs for full time prescribed HE programmes is notably lower than that charged by the universities in England. Colleges charge lower tuition fees and deliver HE under considerable resource constraints. The number of colleges that have access agreements has been increasing year on year and it is likely that trend may be slightly accelerated in the coming years. The limitations of less resource and pressures to maintain lower fees, in turn, have implications for colleges to commit time and resource to initiatives such as TEF and to compete with other HE providers.

There are significant concerns amongst colleges in relation to the costs of registering with the OfS. There are clearly other aspects of the new regulatory

framework which will be fully implemented in 2019/20 and is likely to impact on College HE in the next academic year. The survey has also highlighted a level of optimism that the post-18 review presents to call for fairer funding for FECs and to offer genuine alternatives to the more conventional forms of HE.

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