

UVAC response to: Review of the Future of FE Colleges

Introduction

The University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC) is the UK representative organisation of 45 HEIs and 35 FECs committed to influencing, promoting and supporting the development of vocational education and training in both higher and further education.

UVAC was established in 1999 as a not for profit organisation to *advance education for the public benefit* by championing vocational learning. As such, UVAC acts as an independent voice for higher education and further education on higher vocational learning.

UVAC undertakes the following activities:

- Advocacy – we champion vocational learning and represent our members' views on higher level vocational education and training to Government, funding and planning agencies and stakeholders
- Membership services – we provide a portfolio of membership services including, disseminating information, production of good practice guides and the organisation of conferences
- Research and publications – we manage a research programme covering; the accreditation of prior experiential learning, vocational progression, unitisation, vocational qualifications and other issues as appropriate and topical
- Awarding Body products – we support the provision of QCA regulated awarding body products to the higher education sector through appropriate UVAC/awarding bodies agreements
- Accreditation Services – we provide a range of accreditation services covering foundation degrees, professional development programmes and initiatives to support progression from apprenticeship, vocational and work-based qualifications to higher education.

Our objectives and work are also supported by our corporate members who include; the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) - National Office, and Sector Skills Councils (SSCs)/former National Training Organisations (NTOs). We also work closely with our strategic awarding body partners, commissioning appropriate research and supporting the development and implementation of learning products. UVAC is, accordingly, a unique organisation and an essential partner when engaging HEIs and FECs in the implementation of national vocational education and training policy initiatives.

As a result of the activities we undertake we aim to ensure that:

- More learners have the chance to progress to and benefit from higher education

- Barriers preventing different groups of learners access higher education are identified and addressed thereby widening higher education participation
- The quality and relevance of higher education provision is enhanced for the benefit of individual learners, employers and the nation as a whole.

Summary

UVAC welcomes the review of further education colleges chaired by Sir Andrew Foster. Further education colleges are the Cinderella of the education system; they perform a fundamental role in providing opportunities for lifelong learning and giving hundreds of thousands of young people and adults a second, third or fourth chance to benefit from learning. They play a major role in supporting social inclusion, widening participation and support individuals in developing the skills needed by local economies in general and employers in particular. This is where we believe the activities of further education colleges should be focused. They should have a lead role in the provision of vocational provision (to NQF level 3), be local conduits for HE provision, whether direct or indirect and reach local agreements on the delivery of 'A' levels.

The role of further education colleges as centres of lifelong learning should therefore be championed and celebrated and not be diluted by moves to change status to higher education colleges, or to refocus on tangential activities. We would, however, note that the performance of the further education sector does vary and that some colleges are far more effective than others, particularly in key areas, such as responding to the needs of employers and local communities. A fundamental objective of the review should therefore focus on how the profile of further education colleges could be enhanced and how the overall performance of the sector could be raised to match the performance of the best institutions. We would also suggest that any consideration of amalgamation, mergers, or reducing the number of further education colleges was based on the needs of their customers (local communities, learners and employers) and not on the preferences of funding, quality assurance or inspection agencies.

Given UVAC's remit, our analysis and observations largely focus on the role of FE colleges in the provision of higher education, vocational progression, the FE/HE interface in general and the relationship between FECs and HEIs in particular.

QUESTION 1 - What are the key issues which the review should examine in relation to the role, purpose and mission of the further education college sector and colleges relationship with other learning and skills organisations (schools, independent providers, universities, the voluntary sector, local authorities etc)?

The relationship between further education colleges and higher education institutions should be a central feature of the review. Such relationships are complex and vary between localities and institutions. Many further education colleges, particularly the Mixed Economy Group play a fundamental role in the provision of higher education. Indeed, approximately 10% of all higher education provision is provided by the further education sector. Likewise, some HEIs have an interest in the delivery of further education provision and have, for example, developed further education faculties. From a UVAC perspective we would argue that the relationship between FECs and HEIs

should be established and developed on the basis of meeting the needs of individual learners and employers. We would offer the following observations:

- *FEC and HEI Partnerships* – A variety of models are apparent that meet particular local circumstances. In determining the relationship between FECs and HEIs, geography matters. Where a locality lacks the physical presence of an HEI, then FECs and HEIs should be encouraged and supported to develop delivery partnerships. In other cases, the presence of an HEI with a track record in supporting progression, working with employers and developing vocational provision in a particular locality could mean a decision by an FEC to offer provision may result in duplication of activities and confusion for learners and employers.
- *Clarity of the Relationship Between the FE and HE Funding, Inspection and Quality Assurance Systems* – Where there is a justification for a further education college to offer higher education provision, the regulations and operation of HEFCE, the LSC, QCA and QAA can cause difficulties that have an undue impact on the service provided to individual learners and employers. HEFCE funding regimes and initiatives can, for example, discriminate against further education colleges. In some cases FECs are not able to bid for HEFCE capital funding, or be the lead partner in certain initiatives, even where they are ideally placed to deliver a higher education programme required by individual learners and local employers. This is a somewhat ironic situation, as in many cases HEFCE initiatives are aimed at widening participation, enhancing employability, or developing excellence in teaching and learning. Colleges offering both further education and higher education can also find the burden of working with two funding regimes (LSC and HEFCE), quality assurance arrangements, QCA regulated awarding bodies, HEIs and inspection regimes a substantial burden.
- *Lifelong Learning Networks* – Lifelong Learning Networks need to be developed as a more equitable partnership between further education colleges and higher education institutions. Greater clarity is also needed in which national agency is responsible for supporting and resolving issues around the FE/HE interface, the LSC or HEFCE? Unfortunately, as systems currently operate there are major problems which fall between the respective responsibilities of the LSC and HEFCE. Progression of Advanced Apprentices to higher education is a good example of the problems associated with the FE/HE interface. Currently no organisation collects statistics on the progression of Advanced Apprentices to higher education. No organisation ensures the ‘fitness for purpose’ of Advanced Apprenticeship frameworks for higher education entry or raising their profile with HE academic and admissions staff. This is despite the LSC having a commitment to *‘where appropriate, ensure that every Apprentice has the opportunity to progress from Advanced Apprenticeship to Foundation Degrees and other HE Provision’*. Accordingly, in a recent UVAC study, we found that the number of Apprentices progressing to higher education was negligible. Opportunities need to be developed to share experiences and resolve national issues, potentially through a national Lifelong Learning Network combining both the Mixed Economy Group of FECs and HEIs.

- *Validation Partnerships* – For further education colleges offering higher education, provision a validating partnership with an HEI is obviously essential. Many partnerships have worked effectively, others have been more problematic. UVAC's new National Validation Council is designed to offer a national validation service to further education colleges and employers. Uniquely, this service will cover all levels of higher education provision and will enable FECs to deliver provision that meets national employment and potentially professional body needs. The National Validation Council has been developed following extensive consultation with DfES, QAA, QCA, HEIs and the further education sector. To FECs it will offer:
 - A service to validate higher education programmes at all levels
 - A service that enables FECs to deliver learning programmes to national employer and professional standards (UVAC has discussed this issue extensively with a range of companies including GSK and BP)
 - Support for FECs in the use of credit transfer and APEL
 - A system that supports credit transfer from QCA's Framework for Achievement to higher education qualifications and vice versa (initial discussions have been held with QCA)

UVAC would welcome the opportunity to meet with Sir Andrew Foster and the Review secretariat to determine how the National Validation Council could support the development of the role of further education colleges. In particular, the National Validation Council could potentially accredit further education colleges with an outstanding quality assurance record to validate their own qualifications.

QUESTION 2 – What are the strengths of the FE College Sector – locally and nationally?

From a higher education perspective, we would suggest that the strengths of the further education college sector are its focus on lifelong learning, social inclusion, widening participation and the provision of learning opportunities to support individuals in developing the skills needed by local employers and local communities. Crucially, FECs have a fundamental role in the delivery of vocational higher education rather than the general educational courses often found in HEIs.

With specific reference to higher education we would see the strengths of the further education college sector as:

- The ability (in some cases) to offer provision at all levels from entry level to higher education. This ability could, if developed, support the implementation of vocational progression routes on the basis of local economic and employer needs. Logically an advanced apprenticeship, or new vocational diploma, provided by a college could lead to a higher education course offered on the basis of the needs of the individual learner and their employer

- Some further education colleges (but not all) offering higher education can deservedly have a reputation for flexible delivery focused on the needs of the individual learner and their employer
- With a focus on, and contact with employers and the local skills market, further education colleges can through the provision of higher education act as a significant engine of local economic growth.
- Being able to offer provision from entry level to higher education can support the development of vocational progression routes for adult learners, which if adequately funded can help widen participation.

QUESTION 3 – What are the challenges facing the FE college sector over the next 5 years and beyond?

If further education colleges are to maximise their contribution to the development of vocational higher education provision, particularly widening participation and delivering programmes that meet employer needs, there are a number of core issues they must address. These include:

- *Support for and validation of work-based learning* – Supporting, recognising and validating work-based learning at the higher levels is a neglected subject. Many individuals learn best by actually doing things. Similarly, employers want their employees to develop occupational competence and thereby support the development of their businesses. At levels 1 – 3 in the QCA National Qualifications Framework and Framework for Achievement, recognising and developing occupational competence is achieved effectively (with some notable exceptions) through the NVQ system. At higher levels, substantially more work needs to be undertaken to support, recognise and accredit work-based learning. With the exception of certain subject areas (e.g. management), take-up of higher level NVQs is limited, National Occupational Standards are rarely used and even in foundation degree programmes work-based learning achievements are not sufficiently recognised. With the experience of delivering NVQs and contact with employers, further education colleges offering higher education provision could be ideally placed to work with HEIs to develop effective approaches to the validation of work-based learning.
- *Use of APEL* – If more mature learners and those in work are to be better served by higher education provision, greater emphasis needs to be placed on APEL to recognise their previous achievements and future learning needs.
- *Part-time and flexible delivery* – Further education colleges offering higher education provision frequently excel at delivering programmes flexibly on the basis of learner need. We would anticipate that, with the on-going development of foundation degrees and introduction of top-up fees will lead to a continued growth in the demand for part-time and flexible delivery. The introduction of top-up fees may also have an impact on the demand for vocational higher education courses vis a vis academic programmes. Further education colleges will need to be in a position to be able to respond effectively.

- *Credit rating, transfer and the development of higher education vocational education and training routes* – Arrangements need to be in place to ensure programmes of study in FECs have appropriate credit rating and transfer values to enable individual learners to progress and gain maximum value from the learning undertaken. Further education colleges also need to have developed delivery partnerships with local/regional HEIs, or a national consortium to ensure foundation and honours degree students have the opportunity to progress to higher degrees including masters and PHD levels and professional qualifications.
- *Recruiting and training the staff in colleges to work effectively at HE levels* – Further education staff need to be recruited and trained to deliver provision at higher education levels. If FECs are to be able to compete with HEIs, staff contracts at FECs need to be changed to enable staff delivering higher education programmes to engage in curriculum development and applied research. This issue will also have implications for FEC budgets and staff recruitment policies and procedures.

QUESTION 4 – What changes do you think should be made to the FE college sector (and the context in which they operate) in the medium term (5 – 10 years) and longer term?

Given below is a list of headings/issues which you might want to cover.

- **Purpose/mission**
- **Culture and ethos**
- **Image and reputation**
- **Governance and accountability**
- **Leadership and management (local and national)**
- **Engagement with employers/economic role**
- **Social and local community role**
- **Image and reputation**

See responses to questions 1 to 3.

QUESTION 5 – Are there models of good practice/excellence which you would like to draw to the review’s attention

UVAC has undertaken a range of recent research studies focusing on the FE/HE interface, progression from FE to HE and supporting the accreditation of work-based learning at higher education levels. We would happily share the results of our research with the Review.

QUESTION 6 – Anything else you want to add

UVAC would welcome the opportunity to meet with Sir Andrew Foster and outline our views in more detail. We would also like to support the Review secretariat by organising a consultation event for UVAC HEI, FEC and corporate members.

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