

HE in FE: An Unequal Partnership

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In an old comedy sketch John Cleese in bowler hat and pinstripes looks down on Ronnie Barker because he is 'Middle Class', while Barker looks up to Cleese because he is 'Upper Class'. Both of them look down on little Ronnie Corbett because he is 'Lower Class'. Corbett in flat cap and muffler looks up at everyone and declares ruefully, "I know my place".

Although a satire on the class system, the sentiment aptly reflects the diverse HE landscape populated by Russell Group universities at one end, post-1992 ex-polytechnics in the middle and FE colleges, newly ushered into the HE club by government initiatives, who are expected to at least "know their place".

The government white paper 'Higher Ambitions' has signalled the need for a "major change in the culture of our higher education system". Lord Mandelson has added, "Our challenge now is to bring higher and further education into a single integrated knowledge infrastructure." However, the relationship between HE and FE is founded on a number of inherent inequalities which often go unacknowledged and undiscussed and undermines working together.

One inequality is academic. Before IQER, the HEI partner was the sole arbiter of academic standards. Most colleges had never heard of the Academic Infrastructure or the QAA codes of practice. Now, with IQER, for the first time FECs have a direct connection with QAA not interpreted by the HEI. And some HEIs do not take kindly to the idea.

Then there is resource inequality. NSS surveys tell us only 64% of students at an FEC are able to access specialist equipment compared to 76% at an HEI. Only 71% of FEC students say library resources are good enough compared to 81% at an HEI. On top of this HEI lecturers typically teach around 16 hours per week against 24 hours for FEC Lecturers who are paid less for it.

Funding is also unequal. 128 colleges are directly funded by Hefce, the rest are indirectly funded through a partner HEI. While indirect funding may be a useful administrative convenience for Hefce, the problems this causes colleges is inestimable. Indirectly funded colleges do not have direct access to capital funding, cannot bid for ASNs, cannot directly access project funds or make bids to JISC, HEA and other agencies. And because they do not hold their own student numbers, they have no security either. There is a danger that colleges will be used as a buffer to protect university numbers and that means cuts have a disproportionate affect on HE in FE.

But the worst of it is, there is no way out of the second class funding division. Hefce has provided no mechanism to move to direct funding. This is an oversight that needs remedying.

Colleges need to be treated more fairly. Thanks to Hefce and QAA colleges are now responsible for their own HE Strategy and academic infrastructure. Universities now also need to recognise colleges have come of age. And there are some simple steps they could take to acknowledge their academic competence. There should be no artificial limits on colleges being able to deliver honours or masters degrees in their own areas of expertise. Colleges should be allowed to run their own examination boards and manage their own quality procedures. The practice of HEIs moderating FECs should be abandoned as not in keeping with the spirit of peer review models that pervade HE culture. Universities should also consider conferring visiting professorships and visiting fellow status on college staff as they do with directors of companies they value. And they should invite college academics to join their own staff on the platform at award ceremonies rather than reduce them merely to the role of marshals as often happens. These are areas that could be addressed quickly and with little or no cost.

But the single most effective way of removing inequality is to eliminate indirect funding. All colleges with substantial provision (over 100FTE) should become directly funded. This will let them take real control of their own HE strategy and remove the inbuilt servility that the 'cap-in-hand' indirect funding regime will always foster while one partner holds financial control over the other.

There will always be some who look down on HE in FE as second class HE, offering a working-man's degree as opposed to real degrees. But if HE in FE is only ever expected to look up to real HE provision then like Ronnie Corbett all we will get out of that is a crick in the neck.