

Title: Opportunities and Challenges for UK Further Education

Name:

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Bionotes:

Pam Caven took up the position of Director Policy and Stakeholder Engagement, TAFE Directors Australia (TDA), in May 2007.

Pam's career has included being a secondary school teacher, teachers' college lecturer, TAFE teacher, senior manager in State and Federal Government departments, and author. She was a Director in the Victorian Department of Education and Training prior to moving to the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) as Project Director. Post ANTA, Pam managed a variety of projects and was engaged as an audit consultant by the Victorian Auditor General. At TDA, Pam has drawn on input from members to develop formal TDA submissions to a range of government and departmental enquiries and consultations. She has managed significant national projects and organised a range of seminars and the annual TDA national conferences.

Pam holds a BA (Hons), Dip Ed, Cert.IV (Training & Assessment) and a Masters degree in Education – Leadership and Management.

TDA/LH Martin UK Study Trip: Higher Education in Further Education (FE)

Pam Caven, Director Policy and Stakeholder Engagement, TAFE Directors Australia (TDA) and Associate Professor Leesa Wheelahan, LH Martin Institute, University of Melbourne, spent over two weeks travelling in England and Scotland, including London, Plymouth, Bristol, York, Durham and Glasgow in June-July 2011. In the course of this trip, discussions were held with a wide variety of key informants from universities, Further Education (FE) Colleges (principals, senior managers, coordinators and teachers), officials from government agencies and statutory bodies including the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS), Foundation Degrees Forward, the Institute for Learning, and the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in England, and Skills Development Scotland. Meetings and discussions were also held with the Association of Colleges in England and Scotland's Colleges which are the sister organisations of TDA, and with the Mixed Economy Group which represents FE Colleges in England that have a substantial component of higher education load.

Both Associate Professor Leesa Wheelahan and I presented papers on Higher Education in FE in Australia at a lively session in London, hosted by the Association of Colleges. The

willingness of UK colleagues to both share insights and provide hospitality was both impressive and generous.

This UK trip coincided with a period of considerable flux for the UK further education system – a period of recovery from the GFC with the Coalition Government implementing measures to curtail government spending. The priorities and directions of the Government were articulated in the White Paper, *Students at the Heart of the System*, published in late June 2011.

It is a period of opportunities and challenges for FE Colleges.

Purpose of the Study Trip

Overall, the purpose of the trip was to build collaborative networks and enhance LH Martin/TDA's understanding of the policy and operational implications of Further Education Colleges delivering Higher Education in the UK, in particular:

- to gain insight into the English and Scottish systems and specifically, the extent of Higher Education in FE, how it is funded and how it is administered and to consider the implications for Australia
- to examine the policy implications of Higher Education in FE, particularly in relation to issues of governance, quality assurance, academic standards, staff development, student support and IR
- to document UK definitions of Scholarship as an essential component of the delivery and assessment of Higher Education in FE – a particular focus of the TDA Board
- to consider UK institutional partnerships, strategies and programs
- to develop networks with a view to international collaboration, further study tours and professional development opportunities/staff exchange between the UK and Australia.

Background

In Australia, and similarly in the UK, government policies, the economic environment and industry practices are providing the impetus for an increasing number of people to seek higher level qualifications, particularly higher education qualifications.

The mid-level technical, para-professional and professional occupations for which TAFE institutes have traditionally provided training increasingly require or expect higher education qualifications for entry to the occupation or for career progression.

The Bradley Review acknowledged the emergence of a more diverse tertiary sector. TDA responded to the Review's recommendations in the *Blueprint for Australia's Tertiary Education Sector*, published in July 2010.

Since that date, there have been further changes in the Australian higher education policy landscape: The Australian Government's decision to uncap undergraduate places at universities from 2012; the endorsement of the Australian Qualifications Framework and the establishment of new regulatory arrangements for vocational education and training and for higher education.

Australian Governments are clearly supporting a market-based approach to the provision of both vocational and higher education.

TAFE institutes in Australia and FE Colleges in the UK, traditionally the primary providers of vocational education and training, are responding to this changing educational landscape by increasingly offering higher education qualifications in their own right or in partnership with universities.¹

Relationships between TAFE institutes and universities will involve competition and cooperation, although different TAFE institutes may emphasise one or the other in their relationships with universities. Rather than this movement of TAFE institutes into the provision of higher education programs being seen as competing with universities, it is likely that universities in Australia, particularly the recruiting universities, will want to form more linkages with TAFE institutes to increase their share of Commonwealth Supported Places and guarantee a pipeline of students. Those TAFE institutes that offer higher education qualifications in their own right will continue to develop their provision and participate in the tertiary education market for students for degrees, and also form partnerships with universities where this is mutually beneficial.

The offering of more higher education qualifications has also brought challenges to TAFE institutes; in the partnerships that TAFE institutes form, their academic governance arrangements and the quality of their higher education delivery and assessment. A consistent theme in Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) reviews of Higher Education offered by TAFE institutes has been the need for a better appreciation of what is meant by scholarship and for more understanding of the importance and value of higher education governance arrangements.

In many respects, TAFE institutes in Australia have a number of issues in common with FE Colleges delivering Higher Education in the UK.

Further Education in Higher Education in the UK

The UK higher education in FE landscape is complex with a variety of institutions and agencies delivering and accrediting vocational education and training, further education and higher education qualifications.

FE Colleges have an important role to play in the provision of Higher Education in the UK. They offer approximately 10% of the delivery in England.² Scotland's FE Colleges deliver about 25% of higher education undergraduate student load (depending on how this is

calculated).³ Some English FE Colleges have a considerably higher education load, most notably the Mixed Economy Group of Colleges (40 of 340).

Three hundred and forty-seven FE Colleges in England were incorporated in 1992.⁴ They deliver to 16-19 year olds undertaking secondary school certificates (a major student cohort for FE Colleges in contrast to TAFE institutes); to students undertaking a range of vocational qualifications – NVQs (which are the equivalent of training packages) and apprenticeships (although the latter in much smaller numbers than in Australia). FE Colleges also offer Higher National Certificates (HNCs) and Higher National Diplomas (HNDs). These national qualifications have a long history in the UK.

FE Colleges have an enviable success rate of 81% retention and 65% were judged by the Quality Assurance Agency to be good or outstanding.⁵

Scottish Colleges have recently embarked on a rationalisation and modernisation of their HNCs and HNDs.

The greatest growth in higher education in further education in England has been in Foundation Degrees. These are offered by universities and FE Colleges, although not in Scotland. Scottish colleagues were of the opinion that HNCs and HNDs are well understood by the community, employers and students. Scottish HNCs and HNDs are accredited by government accreditation bodies and, unlike Foundation Degrees, do not need to be validated by universities. Scottish FE Colleges argue this gives colleges the independence they need to develop locally responsive education qualifications.

Foundation Degrees were largely an initiative of the former Labour Government. While their original purpose may have been to provide a higher education pathway for existing workers and part-time students, it would appear that they have morphed over time into transition qualifications for exiting secondary students and for mature-aged students who wish to enter higher education. They became part of the former UK Government's strategy for widening access into higher education, especially for students from low SES backgrounds. FE Colleges currently supply 38% of higher education entrants.⁶

'All Foundation Degrees have to meet two crucial benchmarks: employer involvement in curriculum and delivery and workplace delivery' (Susan Hayday, Director of Workplace Learning Strategy, Foundation Degrees Forward). Their focus is on local industry and vocational relevance, although there is some tension between their vocational orientation and the objective of widening access. There is a plethora of these degrees throughout England, some would argue potentially causing confusion to employers.⁷

Foundation Degrees are not just the first two years of a degree; they are designed to have a specific vocational outcome and support student transition to a full degree. This is in contrast with Australia especially via franchising arrangements under which universities determine the courses of their partner institutes.

Despite their popularity the future expansion of Foundation Degrees in England is unclear. They are seen to be a Labour Party initiative, not wholeheartedly embraced by the Coalition Government.

The larger picture however of the Coalition Government's changes to the funding of universities is a mixed one – there appear to be both opportunities and challenges for FE Colleges in this more competitive marketplace. FE Colleges are looking at how they can tap into the additional 20,000 places that the Coalition Government has allocated for fees lower than GBP7500.

The Association of Colleges warned, prior to the White Paper, that a more competitive marketplace for higher education students may play out badly for FE Colleges. The Association pointed to some validating universities withdrawing from their relationships with colleges. There was some evidence of a growth in teacher redundancies.⁸

On the other side of the ledger, as many English universities signal their intention to charge the maximum allowed GBP9,000, some FE Colleges are taking a different approach. New College Durham, an FE College, currently has about 1,500 students doing higher education courses and plans to pitch its fee for degree courses at GBP6,000. Like many FE Colleges, it hopes to gain from the expansion of places for institutions with an average fee of GBP7,500 or less. The principal, John Widdowson, welcomed the changes announced in the White Paper, 'The ability to offer additional places is really welcome. There is demand from people who want to study locally and do vocational qualifications. [Colleges] will fill these 20,000 places pretty quickly and still find unmet demand'.⁹

FE Colleges it would seem will charge lower fees and potentially attract more students but they do this in a time when the UK Government is imposing cuts to public funding, for example, in education infrastructure and places. The Government is also encouraging greater competition that will come from existing for-profit providers and also from global competitors (Pearson, Apollo Group and Kaplan are just a few of the world's leading education companies).

Partnerships with universities

Many of the tensions Australia experiences between TAFE institutes and universities in developing partnerships and competing in the market are evident in the UK.

Some provision in FE Colleges is directly funded by Government but most is routed through universities in franchises and partnerships. Even where directly funded to deliver higher education, FE Colleges must still rely on university partners to validate their higher education qualifications.

Some 'mixed economy' FE Colleges are seeking self-accrediting status for their own foundation degrees through the Privy Council. This is the preferred position of FE Colleges,

as some (particularly the Mixed Economy Group [MEG]) feel that they are otherwise required to fit into the 'university mould' of higher education qualifications and participate in often prolonged validation processes.

Partnership arrangements between universities and FE Colleges exist on a continuum: franchising arrangements are at one end, which often involve little support or interaction between the university and FE College and at the other end, true partnerships, in which the university helps to build capacity in their partner FE Colleges and provide resources and support to teachers and students.

The concept of scholarship

Members of the Board of TDA requested that one of the issues to be pursued in the UK was scholarship. The sub-text was to investigate how FE Colleges prepared their higher education students to make a successful transition to study at university. What was the understanding of scholarship in FE Colleges in partnership with universities? What arrangements did the Colleges/the partner universities have in place to foster and develop scholarly behaviour and activity?

As in Australia, there was ongoing interest and lively discussion on the topic in the UK. Our UK colleagues certainly felt that there was a need to go beyond a narrow definition of scholarly behaviour as being engaged in research and publication. While there was a multiplicity of views, there was broad support for Ernest L Boyer's report, *Scholarship Reconsidered*¹⁰ with its exposition of the 'scholarships of discovery, integration, application and teaching'.

There was also general agreement that all students undertaking higher education study needed to develop cognitive, critical and analytical skills.

FE Colleges have adopted a range of strategies to promote scholarship for further education in higher education staff and students.

Case study: The University of Plymouth Colleges Faculty – "Like the Roman Empire"

The University of Plymouth Colleges Faculty has a thoroughgoing approach to promoting quality and scholarship in their delivery of their Foundation Degrees. The Faculty works with 19 partners (the majority are FE Colleges) in a large geographical area, stretching from Bristol to Penzance. This is the largest partnership in the UK with 10,500 students (one-third of the university population). The University validates all courses and awards the qualifications offered with its partner FE colleges.

The Faculty also recognises the differences between university disciplines and academic faculties and, like the Roman Empire, deals with its component parts differently.

All staff who teach further education in FE partner Colleges are registered university staff and have access to all university facilities, although the university is not their employer. The Dean of the Faculty, Dr Colin Williams, maintains that the focus of the Faculty needs to be on the students – staff need to adjust to a variety of learning styles. Many of the students come from low SES backgrounds and would not previously have aspired to or had the support to go to university.

Dr Williams and the staff in the Faculty are keen to foster an academic community across the University that supports scholarship in staff and students via:

- academic liaison staff from university faculties working with colleges at a subject level, recognising the differences between disciplines
- Subject Forum Chairs as a bridge between the FE Colleges and the university faculties
- an annual Conference, for example, in the Liberal Arts. (This year the Conference had a focus on censorship.)
- master classes for all higher education teaching staff at partner colleges
- seminars on topics such as copyright
- external examinations.

The elaborate quality assurance and administrative structures of the Faculty are not necessarily replicated in other college/university partnerships. In many cases it is understood that the validating university will visit a college once a year and if they are unhappy with what they see, will commission an independent reviewer.

Case study 2: The Higher Education Academy (HEA)

The Higher Education Academy (HEA) in many senses performs a similar function to the Australian Learning and Teaching and Learning Council (ALTC), whose functions will transfer to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR).

HEA works with College principals, university academics and further education staff to establish a range of strategies to support FE College staff in attaining the understanding and skills to engage their students in scholarly activities, including workshops on assessment; experiential learning; exploration of pedagogy for higher education in further education; a scholarly activity webpage print and soft copies of resources; and webinar facilities for further education staff.

Case study 3: New College Durham – “It’s about the language”

John Widdowson, Principal of New College Durham and convener of the Mixed Economy Group, frames the debate around scholarship in terms that emphasise the ‘applied’ nature of higher education as offered by FE Colleges. While he supports higher education students

acquiring 'critical professional practice', bringing together skills and academia, he believes that some academic behaviour is designed to exclude low SES students.

Some of the strategies New College Durham staff use to ensure that students are being prepared for transition to university include the availability of personal and professional development units (subjects or modules); an academic librarian working with students on assignments and moderation between teachers.

Staff at New College Durham maintained that retention is very high in their higher education in further education courses and students are adequately prepared for transition.

Staff acknowledged, however, that the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) has observed that FE Colleges overall are not systematic enough in reflecting and recording what the staff are doing and therefore are not sufficiently strategic.

Supporting regional economic development

In England, there is considerable focus on local development of programs, especially via Foundation Degrees. It is argued that there are gains in regional arrangements that raise the levels of skills in a region via retaining people in the region thereby creating a bank of graduates that may attract industry to the region (University of Plymouth Faculty perspective).

Australian Governments have indicated that TAFE institutes will play an important role in increasing access to higher education in regions; however, there has been less discussion about the way higher education in TAFE institutes can support regional economic development.

The implications for Australia are that it would appear that new higher education qualifications that are in response to local demands and requirements will need to be developed, in contrast to just taking the first two years of existing 'generic' degrees at universities and arranging for them to be delivered by the TAFE institutes in the regions.

Building capacity

The UK Government requires further education teachers to be registered, to have teaching qualifications, and to document their annual Continuous Professional Development Program, although this is not required if they exclusively teach only higher education programs.

The UK Government has, in the past, also funded consortia arrangements that are premised on a university working with a number of different further education partners to build the FE College's capacity to offer higher education. A number of these consortia have remained even after initial funding ceased.

The research funding bodies have also funded extensive research into higher education in further education. Some of the strategies employed by Colleges have been examined under the section on scholarship.

The implication for Australia is that it would be beneficial if the Australian Government placed a greater focus on building capacity of higher education teachers in Australian TAFE institutes and in helping build capacity for academic governance in TAFE institutes more broadly.

Governance

FE Colleges offering Higher Education are required to have appropriate academic governance, that is, appropriate structures, academic representation and terms of reference.

Colleges are audited by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) to ensure these requirements are met. As an example of what is possible in partnerships, the University of Plymouth Colleges Faculty has integrated academic governance with representatives of its nineteen Further Education partners on its academic governing bodies.

Funding

The Further Education sector in England is represented on the key higher education funding body by John Widdowson, Principal of New College Durham, Chair of Mixed Economy Group.

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funds universities and FE Colleges either directly or indirectly.

Additionally, an FE College principal is a member of the UK commission for Employment and Skills (contrast this with the lack of VET or TAFE institute representation on the AQFC and the absence of any TAFE institute representatives in the higher education funding arena).

Conclusions

This study tour provided insights into many facets of higher education in FE. The UK higher education in FE landscape is complex with a variety of institutions and agencies delivering and accrediting vocational education and training, further education and higher education qualifications.

A better understanding of the UK FE system, in a period of recovery from the GFC and with curtailed government spending, albeit that this is a period of opportunities and challenges for FE Colleges, was made possible because of the openness of discussions with a wide variety of key informants from universities, FE Colleges (principals, senior managers, coordinators and teachers), officials from government agencies and statutory bodies, the Association of Colleges in England, and Scotland's Colleges.

As stated earlier, this study trip had several goals. Importantly, it was to build collaborative networks and enhance LH Martin/TDA's understanding of the policy and operational implications of FE Colleges delivering higher education in the UK. In my view, each of the goals was achieved and now, for us in Australia, the benefits will be when we draw on our collective findings and experiences and share those with our colleagues here and in the UK.

Endnotes

- ¹ There are different models of Higher Education in Further Education/VET across Australia's States and Territories, including:
 - Dual sector universities (which increasingly includes the delivery of Higher Education by the TAFE divisions)
 - Partnerships/franchising
 - TAFE offers degrees and associate degrees in their own right (Victoria, South Australia and New South Wales)
 - TAFE offers associate degrees as a vocational outcome and as a pathway to university (Queensland, New South Wales and Western Australia).
- ² Statistic provided by Foundations Degree Forward.
- ³ Statistic provided by Scotland's Colleges.
- ⁴ The UK Government is responsible for education and skills in England only.
- ⁵ Julian Gravatt, Assistant Chief Executive, Association of Colleges Seminar, 19 July 2011, Sydney.
- ⁶ Julian Gravatt, Assistant Chief Executive, Association of Colleges Seminar, 19 July 2011, Sydney.
- ⁷ Colin Rainey, Senior Adviser Higher Education Academy, advised that there were over 300 Business Foundation Degrees.
- ⁸ *Times* Higher Education Supplement, 7 April 2011.
- ⁹ *The Guardian*, 29 June 2011, p. 11.
- ¹⁰ Ernest L Boyer Scholarship *Reconsidered Priorities*. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1990).