Chapter 3

Scholarly Activity in a Vocational Context: Pitfalls and Potential

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the issues which surround the development of a culture of research and scholarly activity within the college-based higher education sector in the United Kingdom. It uses as a case study the North East College Regional Scholarship Network (NECRSN), which contains a number of providers who are collaborating on the development of scholarly activity within, and across, their institutions. This chapter uses the experience of the participants in the NECRSN to explore the challenges at institutional and departmental levels of inculcating a culture of scholarly activity within college-based higher education. The activities of the network are used as an example to demonstrate how a collaborative approach at a regional level can stimulate innovation and alleviate some of the pressures on academics pursuing research within a vocational setting. The approach has now been operating for one year, and has seen some initial success.

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education (HE) in England predominantly occurs within universities. Some HE is also provided within further education (FE) colleges but this is on a much smaller scale (Universities UK, 2013). As well as offering some HE courses, FE colleges typically have a very wide set of objectives including work with a predominantly vocational slant (this is known as Level 3 work, see QAA, 2104, and typically involves 16 – 18 year olds), adult education, partnerships with industry in providing apprenticeships and widening access to education beyond the 16 year old statutory requirement.

The budget distributions from the Higher Education Funding Council for teaching HE in England for 2014 (HEFC, 2014) were: to universities approx. £1.5 billion, to FE colleges approx. £67 million. This is approximately a 96% against 4% split. These figures do not provide a complete picture as other funding sources for teaching exist (e.g. from overseas students and corporately-funded programmes); such sources make additions to total teaching budgets.

There are risks in generalizing about the nature of CBHE (Goss, 2012; Temple, Callender, Grove & Kersh, 2014). However it is not too simplistic to identify some commonly occurring attributes of this provision. CBHE is:

- Very often highly vocational in nature encompassing technical subjects, health and social care, business and career-oriented sports, media and performing arts.
- Substantially provided in the form of HNDs, HNCs, Foundation Degrees, some full honours degrees and with some provision in the form of higher NVQs and Higher Apprenticeships.
- Characterized by cohorts that are smaller than many which are found in universities where groups often exceed 50 and not uncommonly contain many hundreds of students.
- Less commonly staffed with individuals in possession of research degrees.
- Less likely to draw cohorts widely from across the UK and the world at large and more likely to make up student groups whose families are domiciled within easy travelling distance.
- Very often provided through the academic and financial collaboration of a partner university.

Individual students may have a range of reasons for choosing to pursue an HE qualification at an FE college rather than a university (Temple, Callender, Grove & Kersh, 2014). If there is a necessity to continue to live at the family home then an FE college may be the only local institution offering a preferred course of study.
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