

*Peripheral or pivotal:*

**Further education colleges and the access challenge**

**Dr Neil Raven**



## Introduction

Role of further education colleges (FCEs) in making HE accessible to those from under-represented backgrounds has often been overlooked and under-estimated.

Reflects (arguably):

- The breadth of their offer - which includes the provision of foundation courses
- The vocational nature of many of their programmes
- A widely shared mission across the sector to secure positive destinations for learners, which can include employment as well as higher-level study.



## Introduction

Yet, evidence suggests that those who progress to HE having studied at FECs are more likely to reside in areas of educational disadvantage than their sixth form counterparts.

- For learners in many NCOP target wards, FECs are the most likely destination for post-16 education and training.



## Contention

From this perspective, FECs already make a significant contribution to widening access

However, arguably they have the potential to play an even greater role – and, in doing so, become institutions of *transformational change* (OfS, 2019).

- Although many learners - often from WP backgrounds - do go onto HE, progression rates are not as high from L3 college-based programmes as they are from sixth forms (Tazzyman et. al. 2018).



## The study

An initiative funded and supported by:



## The study

- Aimed at helping two local colleges to capitalise on their access potential
- Involves providing a series of four interactive professional development workshops in each of institution.



## Rationale

- A survey by Action on Access notes the challenge faced by staff in the sector in developing outreach strategies and practices
- Similarly, emphasise has been placed on the value of CPD for college staff at 'all levels' to facilitate engagement with the WP agenda, coupled with 'knowledge exchange' in order to 'spread good practice'.

(Hill, 2015).



## Structure of the presentation

- The development of the workshops
- Key findings from the initial staff surveys and the discussions that took place in the workshops
- Conclusions.





## Development of the workshops

Offered to college leaders, tutors and teachers, as well as careers guidance staff

### Aims:

- To promote a greater understanding of widening access - its aims and objectives - amongst key college staff
- Encourage participants to explore ways in which they - and their institution - could improve access opportunities for their students.



## The workshops (topics)

Workshops covered four inter-related themes:

- What is WP and why widen participation?
- Who are WP learners and what are the challenges they face?
- How can widening participation be achieved (interventions and practices)?
- How do we determine impact (methods of evaluating WP initiatives).



## The workshops (pre-event questionnaire)

A key source used in the development the workshop was a pre-event questionnaire

- Completed by those who were to participate in the workshops
- Used to gather participants' initial thoughts on each of the four main themes
- Provided a guide to their levels of knowledge and awareness of WP
- The collated findings were presented in the workshops, with feedback sought on how these initial thoughts were now viewed and how participants' thinking had evolved.



## The workshops (structure)

Each workshop began with an introduction to the subject

- This included the policy context and wider sector perspective

Participants then considered how this related to their college's situation, before exploring potential developments and practices

- The outcomes of their deliberations were then compared with the feedback received from the pre-workshop questionnaire.

Each session finished with an action planning component (participants identifying what they intended to do as a consequence of what had been discussed).



## Key findings (1)

What is WP?

- Level 2 and 3 transition challenge - colleges tend to take a long-term perspective
- Responses included: *Making HE accessible to those who would not usually access it.*



## Key findings (2)

### Why WP?

There is a strong community focus and rationale to what they do:

- *To ensure [the college] serves an area of high deprivation effectively and meets the needs of its community by offering high quality education, qualifications and skills*
- *Provide [local] employers with more opportunities to recruit high skilled young people*

Role as ‘dual sector’ institutions (also providers of HE)

- *Grow our own - increase aspirations of students on L2 and L3 courses to progress into HE within the college.*



## Key findings (3)

Who are WP learners and what are the challenges they face?

Include those:

- Who lack confidence
- With lower levels of attainment
- With external (family/employment etc) commitments, as well as
- 'Second-chance' students.



## Key findings (4)

How can widening participation be achieved (interventions and practices)?

Here emphasis was placed on utilising the links between FE and HE as 'dual sector' institutions:

- Tours of HE [facilitates] at the college
- Provision of HE progression tutorials and support
- Redesigning the L3 curriculum to include higher level learning, 'so there are already aspirations and expectations'
- HE mentors for L3 students - offering guidance on key processes (e.g. 'UCAS can be daunting to students')
- UGs (inc. those with similar WP backgrounds) from degree programmes to 'partner' L3 curriculum subjects by running workshops on their discipline and talking about their experiences.





## Key findings (5)

How do we determine the impact of WP initiatives?

Responses recognised the potential of being ‘dual sector’ institutions, and included:

### Tracking

- Setting up record keeping systems and WP identifiers - enabling students to be *tracked* on their learner journeys, potentially from foundation-level to HE study

### Evaluation

- Opportunities to capture the medium and longer-term impact of practices and interventions, esp. amongst those that opt for ‘HE in FE’...the college.



## Conclusions (1)

Review at the end of the final workshop:

- Sessions considered effective in raising awareness of WP across the institution and in promoting an understanding of what it means in the college context.
- Judged valuable in helping to identify approaches to enhancing HE progression (and success) amongst those from under-represented backgrounds.



## Conclusions (2)

Feedback from the Head of HE at one of the colleges some three months after the workshops had take place:

- Have ‘elevated discussions’ across the institution concerned with the HE access (and success) of those from under-represented backgrounds
- Implemented various initiatives, inc. identifying those with WP credentials on the student record system
- Established an email group to ensure those from under-represented backgrounds receive information, inc. that related to support provision
- Set up an HE taster event for L3 WP learners.

A number of these responses reflect the college’s ‘dual sector’



## Conclusions (3)

The value of this form of intervention. Its potential to have:

A 'multiplier effect':

- Given the many students will be taught and guided by those who have attended the sessions

A strategic impact:

- Given that college leaders participated in the workshops

Represent a sustainable option (recognising a key Symposium theme):

- Supporting staff who will engage with numerous cohorts of students - many from under-represented backgrounds.



## Questions?

- Comments on the workshops profiled!
- Thoughts on the role of FECs as of 'dual sector' institutions
- Can FECs be the engines of 'transformational change'?



*Thank you*

To find out more about the research, or to discuss how the findings might relate to your work and area, please do get in touch.

[neil.d.raven@gmail.com](mailto:neil.d.raven@gmail.com)

