

Scholarly Partnerships – A research report

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1. Introduction

This report examines the nature of support given to a range of further education (FE) colleges offering higher education (HE) by their partner universities for their scholarly activity. This report follows two previous reports on scholarly activity which focused on the nature of colleges' policies on scholarly activity. They analysed the way policies were written, what features they contained and how they were implemented and integrated into college higher education procedures and processes.

13 phone interviews were conducted, 8 with FE staff and 5 with university staff. All responses are treated as anonymous and confidential. Initially respondents were to be chosen on the basis of generating as representative a sample as possible of different types of colleges. From informal conversations with these initial respondents it was clear that this would not generate useful data as both positive and negative partnerships were not distributed along the lines of college attributes. A second sample was fashioned through a 'snowballing' approach: the Scholarship Development Managers were asked to suggest colleges and staff to approach, they were then asked for relevant contacts within colleges and their partner universities. The research was undertaken under the ethical guidelines of the British Education Research Association.

2. Literature Review

Further and higher education (FHE) partnerships cover a wide range of associations which include articulation agreements and compacts, courses developed and owned by a university and delivered by a FE college to joint development and delivery of programmes and validation of whole higher

education programmes owned and taught entirely by a FE college (Abramson et al 1996). Partnerships have also extended into more strategic collaborations covering research, staff development and curriculum planning. FHE partnerships have been necessary because further education colleges did not have the authority to award their own qualifications. In more recent times colleges have been awarded their own degree and foundation degree awarding powers which means that they can operate at higher education levels under their own auspices without the need for a partnership. This review will focus on what are the main factors which make FHE partnership work. Before that it is worth locating this focus within more general literature and issues.

FHE partnerships are but one example of a more general phenomenon of partnerships between institutions. The literature on partnership (e.g. Jap 2015, Bendell 2017) in general is quite extensive while that on FHE partnerships is more limited. It should also be noted that there are a number of related terms, such as collaboration, which can broaden the scope of enquiry and that there are other terms, such as franchise which can narrow the scope.

The term partnership is used in many different contexts with a range of different, usually implicit, meanings. There can be an emphasis on partnership as an outcome or partnership as a process. These uses emphasise different aspects depending on their provenance and perspective. The term partnership encompasses a wide range of practices and relationships across a wide range of fields, so some caution is required when generalising about such matters.

“The diversity of contexts in which ‘partnership’ is used reveals both the extent of the policy thrust towards this way of working and the lack of clarity about the meaning of the concept.” (Dhillon 2005, 211)

This review draws on some of this literature on partnership in general. FHE partnerships also need to be located within government policy. There is a substantial body of literature which examines this aspect (e.g. Parry 2009; Stanton 2009) and it is sufficient for our purposes to note this. However, we must acknowledge that government policy plays a significant role in setting the environment which influences the types of possible partnerships as well as the extent to which they are encouraged or not. One of the conclusions that can be drawn from this literature is that government policy on FHE

partnerships has not been consistent over the years which has meant that such partnerships have not operated in a stable environment. Partnerships between universities and further education colleges vary in terms of validation and accreditation arrangements, financial arrangements and devolution of the operation of quality assurance systems and procedures.

The literature on FHE partnerships is best considered in terms of its provenance. There is a range of literature from government quangos. HEFCE sources tend to offer advice based on surveys and case studies (HEFCE 2009); QAA sources tend to summarise what has been learned from reviews of collaborative provision (QAA 2004; QAA 2010). The other main source is case studies published in journals. This review will draw selectively on both sources. Partnership consists of layers of collaboration between institutions (Dhillon 2005, 214). This is particularly true of the library which is an often neglected aspect (Collins 2011). In order for a partnership to work effectively all these layers need to function congruently (Mattessich & Monsey 1992). However, it needs to be recognised that each institution in a partnership will have different motivations for engaging in collaboration and that there will be differing motivations within each institution at each layer (Dhillon 2005, 214). It is these layers and the shared values and trust which sustain partnerships and this includes “a commitment to collaborative working and recognition that this way of working can lead to benefits that could not otherwise be achieved.” (Dhillon 2005, 215). Partnership is a complex process and its continuity and effectiveness relies on the social relationships between people whatever formal agreements and policy incentives it is based on (Dhillon 2005, 217-8)

The following factors which it is argued underpin effective FHE partnerships and cross sector collaboration include:

- i. Commitment from all staff (Blackie 1998, 22–23; Connolly 2007, 165)
- ii. Organisations having similar value systems (Trim 2001)
- iii. Trust between partners (Green 1998, 27; Clegg & McNulty 2002; Milbourne et al 2003; Foskett 2006, 363)
- iv. Some argue that there should be equality in the partnership (Blackie 1998, p. 23; Green 1998, p. 27)
- v. Clear articulation of and convergence of aims towards a common purpose (Mattessich & Monsey 1992, Foskett 2006, 357/8), however there

are usually unstated or emergent aims which will need to be worked with but which can confound the original aims (Foskett 2006, 359)

It is interesting to note that a list of problems that can arise in making a partnership work is the exact opposite of those items listed above:

- i. differences in aims,
- ii. language,
- iii. procedures,
- iv. culture and perceived power;
- v. the tension between autonomy and accountability
- vi. the lack of authority structure;
- vii. the time needed to manage the logistics (Huxham 1996)

It is also worth noting a more cultural approach to analysing partnerships which adopts a Bourdieusian perspective in terms of the contestation and collaboration both between the fields of HE and FE as well as between institutions within each of those fields. This perspective focuses on the relative status of these institutions and how that influences the nature and the potential of partnerships. This particular study mainly focuses on the different types of students that high and low status institutions attract and the impact that this has on their experiences of higher education. The authors argue that there is greater affinity between sixth form colleges and Russell group universities (Colley et al 2014, 116) and a struggle for distinction between FE colleges and post 1992 universities in their case study. One implication of this is that while sixth form colleges may find some aspects of partnership easier, further education colleges may find the similarity of status with post 1992 universities in their own respective fields leads the university to emphasise the difference in status between the two fields (Colley et al 2014, 117). It would be worth adding a third field, that of disciplines, to this cultural analysis as there is also a status distinction between old and new disciplines which can intersect with the fields of higher and further education.

3. Overview

Support for scholarly activity operates at different levels: at the institutional level, departmental level and individual level. It seems to operate best when all these levels are aligned and support each other. There seemed to be a trend that those universities with a central partnership or teaching and learning unit

which led on partnership had the strongest support for scholarly activity. It also seemed to function best when all the operations involved in partnership – administrative, curricular, quality assurance and enhancement (etc.) – performed effectively and supported one another. It is not clear from the data whether these factors cause support for scholarly activity to be effective or whether they are indicators that support for scholarly activity will be effective. But what is clear is that support for partnership and therefore for scholarly activity is strongest when it is founded on a “values-based” commitment to partnership working.

There was a strong sense from these interviews that the external environment of higher education continues to shift and that many partnerships are becoming more transactional than transformative. Nevertheless several partnerships still seemed to maintain a more transformative relationship. A key element of this transformative approach was seeing key activities with colleges as an investment rather than as a cost. The range of activities included: events and conferences, training on teaching and learning and research, university staff going out to deliver in colleges, gaining access to funding through internal schemes, attending and presenting at local conferences. The shift away from the transformative approach was to see these kinds of activities as grace and favour rather than as an investment. During these interviews there was very little discussion of what was meant by scholarly activity. From the examples cited, it was assumed that there was a broad definition. Partly this was because most of the respondents were either centrally or peripherally involved in the Scholarship Project but it also seemed that a broad definition was becoming adopted by a wider audience. Weak partnerships which did little to support scholarly activity in colleges had the opposite attributes. When there was little provision between a university and a college then there was less likelihood that there would be much activity supporting the partnership and therefore little support for scholarly activity. While not all partnerships with universities that are geographically distant from their partners are weak, geographical distance did raise obstacles to easy communication and meetings. When other factors such as no university central partnership function, university staff pushed into partnership roles and lack of institutional commitment are added to this geographical challenge then support for scholarly activity was virtually absent. The most common activities associated with supporting scholarly activities in college HE were validation, staff development and annual conferences.

4. Why universities do it

The strongest support for scholarly activity came from those universities with a “values-based” approach to partnerships. It was not that they ignored the financial and transactional aspects of partnership but what the university respondents emphasised was that the university’s commitment to such aspects as widening participation, or their regional role, was central to their rationale for engaging in partnership and supporting scholarly activity. These aspects were seen as opportunities to collaborate on a range of fronts with a range of mutually beneficial potential outcomes. A key element of widening participation which benefited students was also seen to contribute to the university’s interest in terms of developing student progression.

These values based positions were often translated into the university’s strategic plan and its office for fair access (OFFA) agreement. These approaches could be seen both as pro-active in developing the university’s regional role in terms of providing HE across the region as well as defensive in binding the region together. A similar mixture of transactional and transformative purposes was evident in another university seeing FE colleges as a key to future regional developments given that some FE colleges were seen to be closer to small employers and as a key partner in developing the apprenticeship agenda. In particular this university saw the Local Enterprise Partnership priorities as supporting collaboration. A key indicator of the success of such an approach for one university respondent was that the colleges gave each other support.

However, there was still some resistance to partnerships even within those universities that were publicly supportive and there was significant resistance in other universities where the case for supporting partnerships was not so widely accepted. Resistance tended to focus on external factors such as seeing colleges as competitors for student numbers, or insufficient numbers progressing to the university or internal factors such as lack of transparency concerning transfer of funds from the centre to the faculty or department and viewing partnership as too costly compared to alternative ways of generating income or of addressing other priorities. This was despite partnership offices having shown that FE colleges recruit more locally from those who would be unlikely to come to university or having developed a positive business case and procedures for transferring funds. Some disciplines and departments are more commonly represented in partnership working than others.

Partnership working can often depend on a few key staff in particular departments despite the exploratory and functional role of central partnership offices. In some cases, partnership working was supported by having a network of collaborative leads in each department who met and worked together regularly. In particular it seemed that those staff who had worked in FE were more supportive and understanding of partnership with FE colleges.

So understanding the values position of a university partner, the way partnership functions are distributed within a university, the business case for partnership in particular subjects and the background and motivation of key staff can be helpful in considering the scope and volume of support for scholarly activity that is likely to be available.

5. The scholarly dimension to validation, thematic review, quality

Many respondents described the positive role that seemingly functional procedures could have in supporting scholarly activity.

Several FE respondents placed emphasis on the role that validation played in developing their team and its understanding of higher levels; staff who had worked with their university partner in this way would advise others who were validating programmes with other universities and other awarding bodies such as Pearson. Evidence of staff scholarship was a key expectation when validating a new programme; panels wanted to see evidence of staff research but also accepted other activities such as research informed teaching, and dissemination as evidence in this context.

In one FE college it has become significant that Heads of School attended validation meetings and observed this clear steer from the partner university which meant they could see the increased necessity of investing in staff scholarship.

At least one university department and its partners had invested in curriculum development prior to validation with a series of events, some web based, for subject teams, bespoke sessions at partner college delivered by members of the university central teaching and learning team on such topics as formative and summative assessment, integrating learning technologies. In this way curriculum development was linked to the development of academic pedagogic practices which began to inform the types of scholarly activity needed for future programme improvement and enhancement.

Boards of Study, which normally might have a purely instrumental focus, had been developed in one partnership to focus on what each team was doing, how they could get involved in reciprocal activities, or curriculum development, and subsequently progressed into an annual scholarly activity day conference sharing scholarly activity, and exploring how they could work more collaboratively.

One university held thematic reviews with their partners which focused initially on the Quality Code but were less managerial than might have been anticipated. They covered such topics as inclusivity, disability. 20 college staff attended such reviews which were research led, in the sense of examining what literature and research was available and how it would apply in different contexts. In this example material came from both university and FE staff. This university and its partner shared material and engaged in joint publishing with other examples of FE staff being invited to contribute to papers and chapters. Another university ran joint curriculum events where partners pooled resources, looked at programmes, research and wider reading. These were rare examples.

Sometimes particular internal reviews within a college led to opportunities to support scholarly activity. For example, a recently appointed HE manager identified the inconsistency of assessment demands across the college programmes at different levels as an issue that needed to be addressed. Their partner university ran a series of workshops on this topic to inform the development of increased parity and consistency in assessment. She felt that this had improved staff's scholarly approach to assessment and had had knock on effects on pedagogy and curriculum design.

Another respondent gave examples of joint work on ethics and dissertations. They worked with the university staff and were mentored over a period of time until the university was confident in their practice.

6. Staff Development, Continuing Professional Development

Most respondents described the range of staff development opportunities which were available at their partner university. These were extremely wide ranging and topics included:

- course design for employability as the centre, links with employers
- creativity

- e-learning
- employer experiences
- enhancement of student experience
- flipped learning
- higher and degree apprenticeships
- how interviews for nursing courses are conducted
- learning gain
- link to QAA themes
- nature of research
- pedagogic research
- student retention
- supervision
- writing for publication

However, one of the key difficulties for college HE staff was the logistical issue of finding the time in a crowded timetable of commitments to attend such events combined with the geographical issue of such events being too distant to warrant the time needed to attend. Some college HE teams were able to provide cover but this tended to be arranged at departmental rather than institutional level. Some colleges were able to get the timetable of such events for the whole academic year in advance and so make plans to free staff at the appropriate times. One college had reasonably well organised systems for supporting staff attendance at events in that either managers at college provided support or there was reciprocal or rota cover for such activities. One option that one college had developed was that when there was a development meeting at the university the FE staff took their students to events at the university organised by the university students put on at the same time. This also helped with progression in that the college HE students saw themselves as university students.

Some universities had begun to address logistical issues through either developing video conferencing or streaming connections with their partners or by timing the events to twilight sessions which were sometimes easier for college HE staff to attend. One university department ran a dedicated staff development hour on a weekday afternoon and its partner FE department, which was geographically close, had been able to match their timetable so as to free staff up to attend. Another partnership had begun to experiment with different types of meetings such as coffee mornings in which collaborative

groups shared theory and research, particularly scholarship of teaching and learning.

Another staff development activity which supported scholarship was the HEA Fellowship workshops run by the university because they are validated to accredit their own HEA fellowship. The workshops were free, university staff came to the college and ran workshops and offered writing retreats at the university. Several universities offered discounts for staff on Masters programmes as part of staff development.

7. Conferences

Most universities had at least one annual conference either specifically for partners or on teaching and learning to which partners were invited and contribute. One university arranged events more frequently such as a half day work shop every semester with guest speakers on such topics as Brexit, student records. Other universities extended the conference to include an annual partnership dinner which included chairs of governors and addressed wider issues such as devolution.

The expressed benefits of such conferences included

- increased staff confidence in dissemination and presentation
- positive feedback for future developments and individuals
- innovation of college staff in teaching and learning, particularly on interactive learning
- engagement with students and employers,
- getting student to present and become early researchers,
- students presenting their research at the local conference,
- links to students as producers

The scope of such conferences varied. Some would be solely for regional partners others extended to international partners or Erasmus initiatives. Some might have a specific focus on collaborative provision, others were broader in the range of topics. Some had spin offs with for example a digital technologies strand developing into a network with monthly meetings. Many respondents were keen to emphasise the way staff from both the university and colleges presented, both individually and collaboratively. Many conferences were based on one to one needs analysis meetings with partners and several had college staff on the organising committee.

8. Research

Support for research was more patchy and inconsistent. One university had research clusters which FE staff were invited to. Only a couple of FE staff had attended, mainly because of the timing of events. Again FE staff were keen to get information on such clusters as early as possible so they could arrange support more pro-actively. Another university had a regionally based collaborative research cluster, in which staff discussed what they had been reading. It had a very egalitarian ethos and although numbers varied they regularly got at least six members from different colleges.

One college put some effort into finding opportunities to collaborate on research, e.g. on a learning gain project. Another had three successful bids to the Education and Training Foundation over the last four years in which they did some desk based research, piloted and evaluated an intervention. Another college gave an example of working together on researching degree apprenticeships: creating an institutional strategy for the region.

Some colleges arranged research showcases with posters on the types of research carried out by students and staff for Year 1 induction which gave an idea of what year 3 students had been doing. The second years held a mini conference with presentations, prizes, to which employers were invited.

While not strictly speaking a way in which universities supported their partners' scholarly activity, college funding for scholarly activity was mentioned by several respondents particularly when it was linked to validation and subject review.

One college had a scholarship fund of up to one thousand pounds for research on teaching and learning; the college provided support, advice guidance and help in making such applications. Over time the recipients became part of a community of practice, where they shared ideas and supported one another. Support by senior college management was vital in supporting scholarly activity, bidding for resources, getting projects disseminated, organising internal events which provided evidence for reviews, and so it became embedded.

Some colleges reported work that was part of the scholarship project. One example was a research intern working out of the social science department on a construction project examining retro fit cladding, another was on nano technology. Another college also had a research intern system in which the

intern carried out leg work under supervision after having been trained, e.g. doing focus groups, transcribing. This resulted in joint papers with staff. The fact that funds came from the college was seen as a demonstration of commitment and staff felt supported. Dissemination of such examples encouraged others and it encouraged other staff to consider future projects. Several college respondents reported that their college supported staff gaining higher qualifications and that the partner university offered discount for postgraduate study.

Another college reported significant willingness to collaborate at discipline level in sports science with similarities between staff interests but found it difficult to align specific research projects. Another example was of a member of staff presenting the research undertaken using a white board to help dyslexic student.

9. Other connections

Several respondents talked about the value of the depth of partnership relationships and saw many of these as supporting an ethos in which scholarly activity was valued. They cited regular open and honest communication, communicating on weekly basis at all sorts of levels, monthly meetings at middle manager level, with research as a standing agenda item, even at strategic level being extremely supportive of such an ethos. This included the administrative level, which when done well enabled academic staff to focus on academic matters. It also included the Learning Resources staff where the university subject specialist librarians worked regularly with FE colleagues, updating colleagues on new materials, including annual development days.

A related issue which was supported by and supported staff scholarly activity was the development of an HE ethos in students as seeing themselves as university students, through marketing, interview, inductions and other aspects of the programme. Where this worked effectively staff identified the programmes as university courses, university staff visited the students periodically, gathered student feedback; students got university student cards, both franchise and directly funded students and the university had invested more resources in its Students Union to help develop collaborative links. One of the reasons this worked so well in a particular university was that the university was near enough to make such assistance realistic but distant enough for the college not to be seen as a threat.

Student visits to the university proved valuable in many cases. Students from one college attended a research showcase which one respondent felt broadened their view of what else was happening and took them out of the college bubble.

10. Differences between departments

It was clear from the interviews that some disciplines were more committed to partnership and therefore to supporting scholarly activity than others. The following comments are not intended to disparage those disciplines not mentioned but to emphasise what respondents said about some contingent factors influencing support for scholarly activity.

A strong indicator of likely support was the values base of the discipline. So, for example, university education departments featured strongly in the sample as those respondents emphasised their department's commitment to widening participation and to partnerships in general as a constructive way of working. This does not mean that all university education departments will be so positively inclined to partnership. Creative arts, Art and Design was another discipline with a similar attitude. Law, criminal justice and sports science were also disciplines that were mentioned positively.

Respondents reported that in their experience areas that seemed to be less interested and invested in partnership working included business, building and construction and engineering. This does not mean that all such departments in other universities were less committed to partnership.

11. Conclusions

The support for scholarly activity by universities was varied, not only in terms of the type and nature of the support but also in terms of the extent of the support. Support was strongest where the rationale for partnership was values based, where there was a central partnership function, where there was commitment at departmental level supported by individuals with such commitments who had often had experience of working in FE. Support was also most likely to be effective where links were made through a wide range of institutional functions such as quality assurance, administration and the library.

Support could come through what might normally be considered functional activities such as validation but was most likely to come through staff development activities and annual conferences.

12. Recommendations

For universities

- Review the institutional rationale for partnership working and place value on supporting scholarly activity in college HE as an investment rather than a cost
- Ensure that the values, practices and procedures of partnership working permeate all functions at all levels of the organisation bearing on partnership
- Resource partnership roles adequately within the business model and make the internal transfer of funds transparent
- Develop opportunities for partnership staff at all levels to meet regularly both formally and informally for multiple purposes both functional and developmental
- Create opportunities for functional procedures to have developmental activities
- Clarify with college HE partners the definition, scope and range of scholarly activity which might be supported
- Provide colleges with a timetable, and ideally an annual plan, of staff development and continuing professional development events as early in the planning cycle as possible
- Vary the types of meetings for staff development and continuing professional development
- Continue to develop support for HEA Fellowships
- Continue to offer discounts for Masters programmes for partner colleges and extend such offers where possible
- Continue with conferences, varying the type and timing, expect and support spin offs as they arise
- Examine ways in which FE staff can be involved in research
- Value the development of an HE ethos because it encourages and is encouraged by scholarly activity

For colleges

- Understand the values position of a university partner, the way partnership functions are distributed within a university, the business case for partnership in particular subjects and the background and motivation of key staff in considering the scope and volume of support for scholarly activity that is likely to be available
- Clarify the rationale for the partnership university's involvement in partnership
- Examine the university's internal structures and processes which support partnership activities and monitor changes to structures and personnel
- Identify departments and individuals which have a values based commitment to partnership and cultivate such relationships
- Make use of seemingly functional procedures as opportunities for supporting scholarly activity
- Find ways of supporting FE staff to attend university staff development and continuing professional development events either through formal cover arrangements or through better use of streaming technologies or through alternative activities at the university for students or through better coordinated timing of such events
- Prioritise working with a partner university to find ways of increasing staff attendance at university staff development and continuing professional development events
- Support staff, and students where appropriate, to attend and present at partnership conferences and support spin offs as they arise
- Develop a set of incremental steps from local investigative projects to publication in relevant journals for staff to progress along at their own pace and with appropriate support
- Provide significant resources and support for staff to undertake research projects
- Provide opportunities and support for staff to collaborate with partner university colleagues on research projects

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