



Resource Review

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Author(s) / Editor(s):	Gareth Parry, Anne Thompson and Penny Blackie
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Review:

It can be a lonely experience for those of who deliver Higher Education in colleges. Unless HE is a large part of a college's work, it is easy for those on HE programmes to become isolated from the main ebb and flow of events on the rest of their campus.

This is a phenomenon that the authors of *Managing Higher Education in Colleges* are keen to address in their excellent little book. Aware that staff may lack knowledge of the demands of universities or of degree work - and that few people at their college may be in a position to help them - the authors have striven to create a quick introduction to an increasingly important subject. It is a task they have succeeded in admirably well.

At only eight short chapters, there is little excuse for anyone delivering HE in a college for not finding two or three hours to sit down and read it, a course of action which I highly recommend. Wise and uncannily accurate about the situation FE managers and lecturers find themselves in when they deliver HE, the authors clearly know their subject and anyone tasked with providing degrees in a college environment will be nodding in agreement with what they are reading.

Detailed and relatively current, the book is a survey of the issues facing those trying to provide degrees in colleges. However, the educational picture is in so much flux that it would be impossible for any book to remain completely up-to-date for long. Nevertheless, the problems of providing a higher education in an institution that was never designed to provide one, are outlined. As the authors tacitly admit, these difficulties largely remain unresolved in the FE sector.

Although at times rather dry, the central issues facing those who teach and manage HE in FE are succinctly dealt with. The book begins with an outline of the educational environment — created by a history of government initiatives, legislation and a plethora of white papers — which faces the bewildered HE manager in colleges.

Some of the statistics are startling; one in nine students now undergoes their higher education at college and in the academic year 2005/6, there were 47,000 students on foundation degrees, the vast majority of which are delivered by colleges. Given these facts and that MPs will, in the near future, be debating the proposal for colleges to issue their own foundation degrees independent of universities, one would have thought that many of the issues surrounding HE delivery in FE would have been tackled and resolved with some urgency. Reading between the lines of Parry, Thompson and Blackie's discourse, this would not appear to be the case.

The trio goes some way towards raising these issues, but make little effort — almost as a matter of policy — to tell FE managers tasked with delivering HE how to resolve them. The reader is left with the impression that, despite HE being a major feature of FE for at least a decade, it can sit like the proverbial elephant in the boardroom of colleges. How managers get their degree work on the agendas of college meetings as a separate issue is not tackled, although the problem is acknowledged. It is rather like being diagnosed with a chronic illness and told you have to manage it without a prescription.

True, colleges are independent, incorporated bodies and a single answer is not available for the same question at each one, but their advice on the subject suffers from some major fence sitting. A few more pointers on how to change college culture to be HE friendly would have been very welcome.

Nevertheless, a real strength of the book is the questions that it raises. The authors are wise and experienced enough to realise that laying down the law on what ought to happen concerning such issues as contracts for staff delivering HE, facilities for HE students and the opportunities (or lack of them) for staff to engage in research, is simply impossible. However, these questions need to be raised and dealt with by those managing HE in FE.

Much of what is covered is essential knowledge for those involved in the sector and unavoidably dry. But more of an attempt could have been made to enliven it with some real-life examples, an expression of opinion or even a bit of humour to breathe some life into the discourse.

There is the occasional anonymous example, which only begs the question — why the secrecy? Are the relationships universities have with colleges somewhat furtive? Indeed, the work colleges and universities do together are some of the best examples of institutional partnerships around. One would have thought that they would have been proud to be included — in detail — in a work such as this.

One message that is conveyed loud and clear though, is that white papers and policy documents have repeatedly reiterated that the place of colleges is to provide vocationally orientated learning, whether it is FE or HE. The implication here (and in this respect, the authors are merely the messengers of government policy) is that

universities are (to an extent) being let off the hook in terms of imparting their students with skills which may make them economically useful, but colleges should make this their priority.

For example, the authors write:

"The 2006 FE White Paper supported an important and growing role for FE colleges in providing higher education within a focus on employability. The presumption should be that the provision will be occupationally orientated and that the major area of expansion should be foundation degrees and work-based HE programmes."

However, bringing this educational apartheid repeatedly to their readers' attention can become grating, even if well meaning. In my opinion, if universities have allowed colleges to be perceived as the providers of tomorrow's highly trained employees and they as the guardians of elite knowledge, then they have scored an own goal. If students think they can get a degree as well as training in one, then colleges will have a competitive advantage over universities when competing for undergraduates.

Although not a book for the beach, everyone whose professional life, at times, crosses the large grey area between universities and colleges ought to find time to read this important guide to the minefield they are entering.