Student Perceptions of Quality HE in FE

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Abstract

The objective of the research was to investigate perceptions of students who are undertaking Higher Education programmes in a Further Education college (HE in FE). The intention was to seek their views on what were the characteristics of a high quality experience and to use these responses to identify features of the HE in FE experience and suggest a focus for quality improvement actions.

The method used was qualitative, through the use of semi-structured questions during interviews with a sample of respondents from Foundation degrees, and Honours top-ups, at a single college.

The results showed that students believed a high quality experience to be one which provided support and challenge, which was delivered by knowledgeable, well-organised, inspiring and enthusiastic staff, on programmes which integrated theory and workplace practice.

The evidence shows a clear role for HE in FE by providing programmes which neither view students as consumers, nor education as a commodity. Colleges delivering HE in FE should provide an environment in which teaching staff and students can fully engage as joint participants in the learning process, in order to fulfil this role and achieve genuine quality improvement.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to investigate student perceptions of quality in Higher Education taught in Further Education Colleges (HE in FE) and to inform the debate about both the role of HE in FE and its particular characteristics.

Before 1992, HE in FE was limited in extent and scope, often only providing technician level programmes for professional bodies. Higher status vocational programmes were normally taught at Colleges of Higher Education, or Polytechnics, which had grown since the Robbins Report of 1963.

Under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, Further Education colleges (FECs) became corporate bodies, with devolved budgets and new governance free from Local
Authority control. The changes to FE since 1992 also presaged changes to HE in FE. The stability which characterized pre-1992 FE was mirrored for HE in FE by the clearly defined roles of FECs and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) during this period.

The post-1992 environment saw the franchising of programmes from the HE sector to FE. As Abramson noted in 1996 ‘…there is no doubt that…many HEIs saw FE/HE collaboration as one means of achieving strategic growth by widening and deepening the pool of potential students’ (Abramson, 1996 p.10).

The situation was not a partnership of equals however. As Paczuska suggested in her study of the boundaries between the sectors: ‘The superior status of HE in franchising partnerships has been the focus of much resentment by FE’ (Paczuska, 1999 p.101). However uneven the partnership may have been over the years it is clear that the numbers of students taught on HE programmes in FE have grown significantly as Parry notes:

Further education colleges account for some one in nine students studying on courses leading to higher education and higher level qualifications in England. Given that only a small amount of this activity is at the postgraduate levels, a more relevant figure is that around one in eight students are studying at the undergraduate levels in further education settings

(Parry, 2005)

The growth in HE in FE student numbers has not led to the sectors becoming more alike. Institutionally, culturally and in the fundamentals of the curriculum, significant differences exist. The role of HE in FE is clear and it is different to that of the
Universities, as Young (2006) argues ‘… the identity and function of distinctions like those between further and higher education will remain even if the specific distinguishing categories of ‘further’ and ‘higher’ are abolished.’ (Young, 2006)

As Green and Lucas note (Green and Lucas 94-5), the increasing number of students on HE programmes in FE has also led to a change in the nature of the curriculum and a change in teaching and learning, as illustrated by the introduction of Foundation degrees. The history of the Foundation degree highlights the changing relationship between FECs and HEIs, and serves to clarify the features which make HE in FE distinctive.

**Foundation Degrees.**

The establishment of Foundation degrees provides an example of a government policy with multiple aims. These qualifications provided a way of increasing participation in Higher Education, encouraging those with vocational interests with a sub-degree qualification. They also provided an opportunity to increase the qualification level of the workforce, in the face of low skill levels, in comparison to global competitors. Employers could now be involved in higher education programmes and be given access to the curriculum in order to ensure that it met their needs. The Foundation Degree benchmarks, which determined the structure of the qualification, required employers to be involved in the setting, assessment and reviewing of the work-based learning, which was at their heart. (QAA, 2004). As West observed in 2006:
Thus the intention seems to be to harness the 'brand' of the degree to attract students, and to give access to honours degrees, while looking for a greater harmonization, on sector lines to assure employers and to give structure to the emerging format

West, 2006 p.16

It was the Universities who were given a central role in ensuring the standards of the awards:

Restricting the power to award Foundation Degrees to those who already had the power to award honours degrees would signal an emphasis on standards, foster the close relationship between the two qualification levels and raise the status and standing of the intermediate qualification [i.e., the foundation degree].

DfES, 2004  p. 37

Thus, universities have maintained their traditional role of securing academic standards whilst traditional distinctions between the two sectors remain, ‘…differences between FE and HE remained in institutional and sector cultures.’ (Paczuska, 1999 p.109). One structural feature that cements these differences is the contract under which staff are employed. Paczuska notes that: ‘Pay and conditions working hours and time for scholarship …reinforces differences in status.’ (Paczuska, 1999 p.109).

The contracts for FE teachers teaching HE classes typically have longer hours yet lack the time for the scholarship and research enjoyed by their HE colleagues. (QAA, 2006 p.16) There are signs that this situation may change in the future, as colleges respond to two new pressures; firstly, from the process of Integrated Quality Enhancement and Review (IQER) (QAA, 2008) and secondly, from the application process for Foundation Degree Awarding Powers (FDAP).
The distinctiveness of HE in FE is currently acknowledged by QAA in the unique review method: the Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review (IQER). This will force colleges to look at their HE provision as a whole, requiring them to address issues of how they ensure staff are sufficiently well equipped to deliver comparable standards, to programmes delivered by HEIs. The requirements for FDAP go even further in prompting colleges to consider, amongst other stringent criteria, the ‘Scholarship and the pedagogical effectiveness of academic staff’ (DfES, 2007).

There is, consequently, a range of pressures that presage a new era for HE in FE. Underpinning all of these is the activity which is undertaken in the institutions and is ultimately their raison d’etre; that of learning and teaching. The HE / FE boundary is where the debate between vocational and academic education is most sharply highlighted, which the current study may help to elucidate.

**Research into Foundation degrees**

There is a body of research beginning to emerge on Foundation Degrees as documented in the literature review conducted by Harvey (2009) and published for Foundation Degree Forward. He notes regular reviews of Foundation degrees by QAA (QAA 2006, 2007) and a number of recent academic studies. Many of these latter studies focus on the value of Foundation Degrees to students (Caller, 2005) and to employers, (Morgan, Jones and Fitzgibbon, 2004). Another area of academic study has been to explore the legitimacy of Foundation degrees in comparison with their
predecessor Higher Nationals (Mason 2004, Kademo 2008). Following such studies are those exploring the marketing of Foundation degrees and the lack of knowledge amongst employers. Harvey notes that case study research on Foundation degrees examined collaborations between HEIs and FEC (Foskett, 2005) and between academic institutions and employers (Benefer 2007, Stuart-Hoyle 2007). However, citing Beaney, he identifies little research into student experiences on Foundation degrees.

Given the centrality of innovative forms of learning (work based, flexible, blended and reflective learning) to Foundation degrees it is confounding to find that the learner’s experience of engaging with the new qualification is so under examined. Beaney, 2006 p.3

The current research is a contribution to the student experience of foundation degrees and on vocational honours ‘top-ups’ in HE in FE.

**The Current research**

This research hopes to examine what students undertaking HE in FE study believe to be a high quality experience, and consequently that by examining their responses in the light of other academic study, to suggest that there is a distinct role for HE in FE.

The study is not being undertaken to establish student views of HE in FE as consumers of the product in order to champion any form of consumer sovereignty as a foundation for educational provision. Equally, the study is not expecting to discover a consumerist culture of complaint as portrayed by Furedi (2009) although his point is valid that the
consumerist model ‘...inexorably erodes the relationship of trust between teacher and student on which academic enterprise is founded.’ (Furedi, 2009 p.)

A recent publication by QAA representing the views of the president and political officer of the National Union of Students makes an effective case against the consumerist approach to education. Citing Coffield (2008) and McCulloch (2009) they suggest that ‘...when a discourse that calls for students to be seen ‘as consumers’ comes into the mix it throws the system off balance and ‘quality’ suffers as a result.’ (Streeting and Wise 2009, p.2). They support the notion of a community of practice where learning ‘...is a journey learners take on their way to becoming active participants and practitioners in a particular, trade, profession, discipline or discourse.’ (Streeting and Wise, 2009 p.3).

The results of the current study lend weight to this approach, from the context of HE in FE, not only in the learning journey where teaching staff and students interact, but also in the practical and vocational nature of the study.

**Methodology**

The study is one branch of a larger study, which triangulates the views of students, teaching staff and managers involved in HE in FE. A qualitative approach was taken based upon a series of interviews in order to profit from the such a method as opposed to the use of a questionnaire. With an interview questions can be re-phrased and clarification can be sought the respondents are likely to be more receptive to the intent
of a question rather than to a written question. The interviewer can observe how the person responds and can thus achieve greater insight into the nature of the response and the feelings of the respondent, thus adding to the validity of the results. Furthermore, respondents may be more willing to engage more fully with the questions asked and to provide more personal answers, whilst some respondents may be more willing to talk than fill in a questionnaire, which they may view as onerous.

The use of focus groups was a possible approach for this research and one used by Hill, Lomas and MacGregor (2003) into student perception of quality. However, the influence of the views of a few can come to dominate the discussion of the focus group and this outweighed its benefits. (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007 p.288). A limitation which is present for most survey methods however, is that willingness to engage with the process may be limited to those with either very positive or negative views.

Semi-structured interviews were used for the current research to allow the respondent latitude to express feelings and to expand on ideas and to ‘…gather data on the more intangible aspects of … culture, e.g. values, assumptions, beliefs, wishes, problems’ (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007 p.97).

Twelve students were interviewed from a range of HE in FE programmes, Foundation Degrees and Honours top-ups in Business, Computing, Art and Design and Performing Arts. The subject areas were chosen to give a spread of the types of curriculum offered. Age and gender were not judged to be factors likely to influence perceptions as a range of responses was sought, however the sample contained an even match of six male
and six female respondents. Coincidently the employment status of the respondents
was also a match at 6 full-time and 6 part-time students (although not a clear-cut
distinction for HE in FE students as full-time students may be engaged in relevant part-
time employment). All but one of the students was from the UK. The reliability of the
findings could be strengthened by an increased sample size and spread of subject
areas which could be provided in a larger scale study. As Schofield noted in 1993
(p.107) external validity is about replicability and generalisation from the results, but
‘….studying a site chosen for its special characteristics does not necessarily restrict the
application of the study’s findings to other very similar sites.’ Although the current
sample is drawn from a single college it is typical of a large FE college delivering HE so
achieving a degree of ‘fuzzy generalization’ (Bassey, 1999) with applicability beyond the
boundaries of the College.

The epistemological foundations for this study are as articulated by Tsoukas:

All formal knowledge can do is to offer an account of the local context in-time, as
well as give voice to the intimate experience possessed by actors themselves...
Thus, in contextualist epistemology actors are given their voice in the
researcher’s narrative; they speak in their own words, and the researcher is
merely the 'interpreter'

Tsoukas, 1994 p.776

The fact that the sample of students chosen at Honours level are studying on Top-up
degrees, rather than three year honours programmes diminishes the generalisability of
the findings to all HE in FE students and programmes. However, when seeking to
identify particular features of HE in FE in general, it is relevant to note QAA findings
from the summary of good practice in their 2007 review of HE in FE:
• programmes are successful in providing students with knowledge and skills to enable them to gain employment and progress to further study.

• students are able to link theory and practice, to make creative use of their places of work in their projects and, in the best cases, to make use of academic and professional sources in their research

QAA, 2007 p.19

The interviews for this study explore the issues of subject knowledge, and the relationship of theory to practice, with an emphasis particular to the workplace.

An investigation into retention and achievement on Foundation degree programmes by Hampton and Blythman (2006) identified eight main themes. Four themes are seen as unimportant, relating only to ‘…general criticisms that students, on all kinds of courses and institutions, make of contemporary education’ (Hampton and Blythman, 2006 p.83). The remaining four themes were that students felt pressure combining home and work, that they felt overwhelmed by new experiences, that the course was enjoyable, and that they appreciated the practical nature of the course. Of their eight themes, only two were identified by students in the current research, namely that they enjoyed their study and its practical nature.

The study into student perceptions of quality by Hill, Lomas and MacGregor (2003) however, is more closely comparable to this research. Although applying a different methodology, by using focus groups the sample displayed some similarities in seeking the views of student groups which all had a vocational focus of management, education and nursing. They identified four themes in descending order of importance to students:
the quality of the lecturer, student engagement with learning, social/emotional support systems, the resources of library and IT. The first two of these themes are identified by student responses in the current study, as will be seen below.

Discussion of results

When asked to identify a high quality teaching experience on an HE in FE programme the strongest response was related to the characteristics of the lecturer.

Knowledge of subject

In common with other findings students value their lecturers for their subject knowledge, but also their organisation: ‘Students appreciated lecturers who knew their subject, were well organised and were interesting to listen to’ (Hill Lomas MacGregor, 2003 p.16).

Comments from the current interviewees for this research were:

The staff have a really, really good understanding of the course and the literature that they producing. . . John

. . he was just a really, I’m interested in programming and he was a really good programmer… you figure your teacher should have a lot of experience and a lot of knowledge and know how to go about certain problems. . . Peter

However, knowledge of subject was not enough in itself; a point which will be explored more fully later and one which is well illustrated by the following quotation:
It’s the way she teaches as well, she explains things and shows you how to do it rather than some teachers could just go "Do that" you haven’t got a clue if they just say that so

Steve

Organisation

Good organisation is a feature which comes out strongly in the interviews:

…his lessons were always very intuitive, really, really well put together Peter

…high quality teaching for me would mean that the lessons were well structured, the staff were on time, the slides were up on Moodle before the session starts so that if you want to do some reading before hand you know what the session is going to be on….Lynne

…all the lectures have been brilliant, fully thought out and very thorough, all the explanations was consistent. John

the course is run so well, the teachers are brilliant you get on with everybody, they want the best out of you and it helps that we’ve got professional people teaching us. Steve

Art or a science?

Students recognised that subject knowledge and good organisation were not the only features which gave them a high quality experience. When asked to reflect upon whether teaching was an art or a science they were able to recognise that how they were taught was equally important as the content.

Students interviewed believe teaching to be a mixture of art and science

I think it’s probably a mixture of both , I think a lot of it is obviously the science that is the knowledge of their subject and the specific areas they have to cover , but the art is relating it to the paths, and the different situations going on – so yeah, a mixture of both..Lynne

Interestingly, in discussing the art of teaching, more than one student interviewed eloquently identified it as a kind of craft.

yes there is an art, it is a craft, every teacher has a certain style where they push onto their students. They’re forever learning as well, they could go into a class one week
and they’ll have to like try to predict the mood and get the right balance of practical and theory without the boredom getting in between, so yeah. David

The success is determined by teaching abilities and skills, plus I think the most important is the contact with the audience and presentation skills they are integral elements of the complex craft of teaching. Wendy

Another emphasized the creativity of the process

I think you’ve got to have some sort of creative side to this sort of teaching…Alan

Another believed that it was a balance of art and science but that it was the art which made it enjoyable and so allowed learning to be effective:

If they hadn’t got the Art bit then it wouldn’t be as enjoyable to learn or it wouldn’t embed us as much in the students’ brains Lynne

The above responses bring to mind the words of Elliot Eisner:

The practice of science is itself an art pervaded by passion, dependent upon imagination, filled with uncertainty, and often motivated by the challenge and joy of the journey. It is not the application of sanitized routines that teachers were to use as a way to carry on in the classroom.

Eisner, 2002 p.376

In summary thus far, a high quality teaching experience is dependent upon teachers having good subject knowledge and being well organized but also being adept at applying, skill, craft or artistry to the process of conveying the information and involving the students. Additionally, it is worthwhile as Eisner suggests, ‘To understand what teachers do, one needs to understand where they receive their satisfactions, what gives them their highs in teaching’ (Eisner, 2002 p.387). Do they love their subject and do they pass on to, or share this love of subject with, their students?
Love of subject

Most students interviewed believed that their teachers loved their subject and believed this was evidenced by their enthusiasm. Some of the responses were emphatic ‘yes’ and ‘definitely’ (Alan, Sue, David) and almost all of the respondents used the word ‘enthusiasm’.

She just loves the subject, she brings us books in from home, work from home for us to see, she – they’re both really good at what they do. Alan

Again about the passion, about the passion and voice and enthusiasm to showing that they love working with the students and then you can say they actually love the job. Wendy

As to whether this is passed on received a more mixed response but there is a clear majority who answer in the affirmative:

….so if I didn’t love it I don’t think I’d be here so really the love for doing what I’m doing outweighs the not having no money the not going on holiday, that sort of thing. Alan

Of those less convinced, an interesting response from Sally:

Love is a bit thinggy, (strong?) but I do enjoy it

Relationship

The relationship with a teacher is important and this shows up in a number of dimensions. One aspect of which is as (Hill, Lomas and MacGregor, 2003) suggest to be ‘easy to be with’ or as students said in the current interviews, that they wanted to feel
comfortable (Paul) and ‘safe’ in order to learn; indeed they wanted a sense of belonging.

At the end of the day the students are more confident, open minded and I think they feel more safely in the group when they have a good contact with tutor Wendy

...you get to know a lot of friends, with your class you become like a family and you are relations… Peter

The evidence also gives support to other findings: “Students appreciated lecturers who were flexible in delivery of the subject and were sympathetic to their individual need for success’ (Hill and Lomas and Macgregor 2003 p.16)

Teachers need to relate to all in the group but also to know the needs of the individuals.

It was the way he could relate to the students he could relate no matter what age group it was whatever your hobbies was or anything like that he could always find some relation to you and he was just a really good all round person. Peter

They understand you and they know what you struggle with, what you need help with Andrew

they always remember what you’re doing and xxxx seems to know what everybody’s doing and our business tutor knows what everyone’s doing because you can have tutorials whenever you want, you can see them if you need help so and if you say what you want to do they’re really helpful Sue

Indeed trust is a word that is used

she trusts what you can do, she knows your ability and if she, if you can’t get on with your teacher you might as well not be there because at the end of the day she’s doing it for you, she’s wanting you to succeed Steve

It is important to have a level of comfort and trust in order to contribute effectively in class
I think that importance of relationship was much easier to get through the whole process of learning if you think that the teacher’s on your side – you can count on him. Teachers are responsible to create a supportive environment so then the student can feel they can ask or contribute the questions. It is important also to know that the students can speak and their opinions are essential for the teachers Wendy.

I would say it’s quite important actually obviously if you don’t get on with your tutor or your teacher you’re not going to be able to approach them and you’re not going to respond well to them well, so I think it’s a good thing to have a good relationship with them so you feel comfortable asking them for help Paul.

Helpful and supportive

It is not just knowledge, organisation, enthusiasm and love of subject but also the extent of the help and support provided for the students to learn and make progress.

I know that I could go to xxxx at any time of the day and she’d sort anything out or help me or put me in the right direction, you know she does bend over backwards for us chil… well she calls us her chickens and she looks after you are my chickens and you’ll be looked after all the years you are here – and it’s true. Alan

Yeah, if you ever had a problem he would always make time for you, if he was in a class obviously if he was like teaching he’d say come back in x amount of time, but he’d always make time for you no matter when Peter

you can always speak to her about anything because we are such a big group we’ve always got problems you can go and speak to her, there are always people around college but she’s a really approachable person so you can talk to her about anything she understands everything so. And I think it’s sometimes best because you need a more sympathetic, because if you’ve got lots of home problems, family problems she needs to know that Sue

These finding back up other research that learners on Foundation degree programmes ‘…need to feel that they are being taught by knowledgeable and caring staff’ (Hampton and Blythman, 2006 p.90).
Students are not expecting an easy life in being supported though their studies; they also appreciate being challenged and stretched

… you never stop researching you’re constantly researching, constantly in the library and that’s going to help me in the long run. Steve

…he works in a way like he can get you thinking about stuff so make the lesson go a lot quicker ….challenging. Andrew

…one of the tutors I’ve had in the past was really, got everybody in the class involved and kept you on your toes. Lynne

Theory and practice and workplace context

One characteristic of foundation degrees and indeed HE in FE is the vocational nature of the study and the centrality of the employment context.

Foundation Degree programmes are designed to enable learners to benefit from the interpretation of ideas and the experience of practice, within the wider context of employment and one in which knowledge, understanding and skills are clearly integrated.

QAA, 2004 p.8

Hagar (2000) suggests that knowing how to do something is derived from the experience of those who know how to do it, but that it also requires some knowledge beyond the activity, some kind of theoretical framework. (Hagar, 2000 p.286).

From the interviews conducted, there is a variety of responses in relation to the link between theory and practice. At the extremes are the business students who see little practical work on their programmes, to the performers who see mainly practical work but with theoretical underpinning.
As it is a business course there is more theory anyway David

There’s probably about ... some units are about 80% practical, 20% written work,… The theory side is really important especially as it’s what we’re doing…. Steve, a performing arts student.

However there is a degree of consensus that there is a balance:

I think overall it’s been a balance of the two… Lynne Business

I'd say 50/50 mix Peter, a computing student

I’ve got like the theory side and the practical, … anyway so I get the best of both worlds… A computing student John

I can see clearly the balance between theory and the practice Wendy

Oh, definitely a balance of the two, you know we have theory lectures and then we have the practical side of it. Art and design student, Alan.

The vocational context of the study is seen as important by all interviewees, and the review by QAA conducted in 2007 into HE in FE saw the vocational focus of the programmes providing a significant strength (QAA, 2007 p.11).

Hill, Lomas and MacGregor (2003) noted: ‘Students valued a curriculum that was related to their worlds but broadened their horizons’ and specifically relevant to the current study the vocational nature of on HE in FE, there were students’ comments on the linking of theory to the real world and assignments relevant to the workplace.

The level of teaching that we have on the HE course is of a high standard – we have got ex professional performers like xxxx and xxxxxx who have been there, done that and got the T shirt, therefore it’s not just the level of teaching and the experience they’ve got to teach us, but it’s also that inspiration that student’s have with lecturers David
she’s been in the industry, she’s been in the West End she’s had the experience, she trained at xxxx which is probably one of the highest dance schools you could go to, so by experience she is passing her experience on to us so we find it… Someone with experience helps you a lot because it’s somebody there who knows what you’re going through, know what you need, know what you’re at, know what you need to get … Steve

so I get the best of both worlds, so what I’m getting taught here I’m trying to reuse my skills in my working environment which is proving beneficial to my employer A computing student, John

Most of the students interviewed stated some kind of employment motive for doing the course. To improve employment prospects was a clear motive, however this was sometimes linked to recognising and developing particular skills which would also aid employability and promotion:

The reason is to get the proper business knowledge and experience I think I am doing it because I want to update my personal skills too, build more my self confidence …so it’s about building my professional profile now so I want to achieve as much as possible. This is my aim. Wendy

More commonly though was the enjoyment of the subject and the nature of the work. Passion and enjoyment were words used again and notably these two comments

Yes definitely, it’s really crazy because it feels more of a hobby than an actual job, but that’s great because you need to wake up in the morning and want to go to work Sue

And:

I’m doing the course because it is personal fulfillment and who knows where life takes you Alan
The interviews bring out more than simply placing teaching in a vocational context, linking theory to practice. There is a also sense of teachers sharing their experience with their students in order to inspire and reassure, as well as to add context to theory:

she is passing her experience on to us so we find it, we have to push ourselves cos she’s had to push herself and she explains what she’s been through so we know we have to push, worker a lot harder Steve

They speak about past experiences, they tell us about stuff they’ve been in, Embarrassing moments they’ve had within the industry and that kind of, without us even knowing it telling us about stories they’ve done, ups and downs they been through that kind of … it eases us off it, it kind of takes that weight off our shoulders and lets us know that not everything does go right and that there is a chance for everybody to get out there and do it and if you do mess up just move along you’re forever getting involved and developing David

but going into the real world, going into the working world it’s always there. Xxxx teaches you that everything you do here you will be using for the next 20, 30 years – she wants you to learn everything not just the basics, everything Alan

The question now arises as to whether there is a sense of sharing and the creation of a learning community or whether the students see the job of the college as to deliver a product. At issue is the view of education which sees it only as a commodity to be traded as part of a consumerist process of McDonaldisation.

Hampton and Blythman (2006) suggest that students were doing the course to help with a career change from which they conclude that FDs are ‘…making a contribution to the employability agenda as well as widening participation’ (p82). Whilst acknowledging that students may choose a foundation degree to improve their employment prospects, there
seems little evidence to deduce from this that FDs therefore contribute to government agendas.

Whilst government and other bodies may view Foundation degrees as part of the process of equipping the workforce for the global economy, what is motivating students and being delivered on HE in FE programmes conforms to broader educational principles and practices. Although the HE in FE programmes are vocational by their nature, they are not vocational in a commodificationist, McDonaldist sense. Ritzer (1993) used the term ‘McDonaldisation’ to describe the global process of standardisation of all aspects of life, at a low level of standard performance. Part of the process of McDonaldisation is the process of commodification where knowledge becomes a commodity to be bought and sold. He is critical of ‘...the inappropriate extension of McDonaldisation to domains that ought not to be McDonaldised ...everyday educational activity is one of those areas (another is the doctor-patient relationship) that have been overly and inappropriately McDonaldised’ (Ritzer, 2002 p.31).

Government views foundation degrees as part of a process to create a higher education which was ‘...tailored to the needs of learners and of the economy’ (DfES, 2004 p.57). The Leitch Report, (commissioned by the Treasury and written by a former Chief Executive of a major financial services company) came to a predictable conclusion in support of ‘...a demand led system’ to achieve ‘...world class skills’ through ‘...economically viable qualifications’ (Leitch, 2006 p.138).
The processes identifiable here are commodification where: ‘… education becomes a product to be traded internationally’ (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2006 p.878) and a kind of vocationalisation which “turns education into a commodity with economic value” (Grubb and Lazerson, 2006 p.300).

From the interview evidence of the current study however, it would seem that in spite of the intentions of government, students value their experience on HE in FE programmes for reasons other than as consumers of the commodity traded in the workplace. There is more evidence to support the views of Eisner and McCulloch that what they value is being ‘… collaborators in knowledge construction’ (Eisner, 2002 p.381).

Interview responses highlight student views of their own independence in the process of learning. The responses give some support to McCulloch’s view that the relationship between the students and the learner is characterized by co-production rather than consumerism:

In the higher education setting, co-production sees the student, lecturers and others who support the learning process as being engaged in a cooperative enterprise, which is focused on knowledge, its production, dissemination and application, and on the development of learners rather than merely skilled technicians.

(McCulloch, 2009 p.181)

Yeah, I think a degree is a lot about individual learning – we’re not spoon fed I don’t expect to be spoon fed – we’re given a basic brief of what we have to do and then it’s down to us to go and get it, develop, get the knowledge, if we’re good at what we do put it into practice once we’re out there in the working world, which I hope some of will be David
It’s like anything it’s like if you’re training someone to do a job you can only take them so far and it’s the same with the college, I mean it’s up to you while you’re here to make contacts in the outside world, to produce work and show it. You can’t have the college holding your hand, you know for ever. If you want to succeed in any job no matter what it is you do have to push yourself – you’ll get more satisfaction if you are doing it yourself than waiting for the college to give you a list of things why don’t you go here, why don’t you go there? You know, do things off your own back Alan

The College is supposed to give you the foundation knowledge in the subject chosen to then go away and research it even further, so you become more fluent in that subject….. More than a product I mean you get to know a lot of friends, with your class you become like a family and you are relations which if you going into a product and if you go into a shop and buy something then you’re just purchasing something there’s very little after sales where here it’s more than that Peter

Conclusion

Students on HE in FE programmes value teachers who have a good knowledge of their subject, who are well organized and who can teach the subject in an interesting manner. They value teachers who use their own workplace experiences to illustrate the subject matter and who can effectively combine theory and practice to create an inspiring learning experience. Students value a personal approach to leaning which recognizes their needs and is supportive; they need to feel comfortable in the learning situation as well as inspired. They appreciate teachers who are enthusiastic and who love their subject and can pass on that enthusiasm and love to them. They welcome teachers who provide challenge and stretch and who involve them as partners in learning, requiring them to push themselves to achieve at higher levels. Students value the qualifications that they will receive from successfully completing their course, but are motivated by personal development, interest and even passion for learning.
Much of the above may come as no surprise to teachers in HE in FE, or indeed to teachers in other sectors. However it serves as a reminder about the fundamentals of the educational interaction; a reminder that in the face of McDonaldisation and commodification, even on vocational qualifications designed with global competitiveness in mind, educational principles and values remain paramount for students and teachers. Fundamentally HE in FE has a vital role to play in providing vocational education which links theory to practice, and to the workplace yet which engages teachers and students in a joint endeavour.

**Recommendations**

In order to provide a high quality experience for students on HE in FE courses, colleges should ensure that staff are knowledgeable about their subject, are able to engage in scholarly activity and maintain continuous subject-based professional development. Teachers should be able to maintain links with the workplace in order to guarantee the currency of their knowledge. They should be enthusiastic and challenging as well as flexible and imaginative in their delivery. Procedures should be in place to ensure that students are supported well, through both academic and pastoral tutorials. It is only by such actions, which focus on the distinctive features and strengths of HE in FE, that quality improvement can become a reality.

If you think about further work, would it be useful to consider education versus training?
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