

FEATURED RESEARCH

HE in FE: how one college went all the way

Many colleges offer sub-degree qualifications (HNC/D and Foundation Degrees). But the complete delivery of honours degrees in further education (FE) colleges is relatively new. Learners who want to complete a full degree usually do so by ‘topping up’ at the partner higher education institute (HEI). One college that has started making full degree courses available is Neath Port Talbot College in Wales, which offers BSc and BSc (Honours) programmes in care studies and childhood studies.

The college had a history of collaboration with local universities, offering HND qualifications in care studies for example. But students indicated that instead of progressing to a full degree at the HEI they would prefer to stay on at the college – and staff teaching on these sub-degree programmes had also expressed the wish to continue with the students and ‘see them through to the end’. So the college applied to the partner HEI to offer BSc and BSc (Honours) programmes in care studies and childhood studies.

Key issues the college needed to resolve were how to sustain an HE culture in an FE environment and whether their staff were experienced enough to support students undertaking dissertations.

A review of previous research by two of the HE lecturers at the college revealed three main dimensions to establishing an HE culture in FE.

Teaching and learning – the research showed that it is important that learners develop skills not only to study at a higher level but also to work independently. They must also actively and critically engage with knowledge. Teaching staff needed both academic and vocational expertise in their subject areas.

Physical dimension – the need for identified areas for the provision of HE – either key areas within existing facilities, or designated units or centres where HE activity can flourish. Such an environment provides an identifiable space where HE learning processes and values can be modelled for the HE learners and is also a place where staff have the opportunity to undertake scholarly activity or research.

Symbolic dimension – the creation of a distinct identity for the learners through the introduction of graduation ceremonies, relevant signage and HE student common rooms – all of which can enhance the HE status and identify the learners within the FE environment.

The college’s approach

At Neath Port Talbot College, the core teaching team of four lecturers involved in the BSc care studies and childhood studies programmes teach only at HE. They don’t have the disadvantage the HE staff at the college found of moving between FE teaching at a variety of levels and HE teaching. The four lecturers all have higher level qualifications and two of the team are experienced at supervising dissertation students. They also work as



dissertation supervisors at Masters level for another local HEI and are engaged in collaborative research with one of their partner HEIs.

All teaching takes place at the HE centre – a self contained block that has been recently refurbished with new equipment. The centre is used exclusively for the delivery of HE courses, so as to create a university identity and learning experience. The academic year is divided into two semesters: two 20-credit modules are taught in the first semester and one in the second to allow time for the learners to concentrate on the dissertation (if pursuing the honours programme) which is a 60-credit year long module. The taught element of the programme follows the format previously found effective when supporting Foundation Degree learners: the theory base is taught in the early part of the module with reflective learning incorporated through tutorial sessions.

The issue of how many hours should be allocated to the task of supervising student dissertations was debated at length. As the host HEI allocated 10 hours, this was the agreed norm and was included in the contractual teaching workload. The supervision is restricted to the members of the HE teaching team who already have postgraduate qualifications with an established publication history. As well as being provided with a dissertation handbook, the learners are given guidance on topic choice to ensure that their area of interest is researchable, and provided with guidance on the selection and relevance of research material.

The college's results

After the first two years of the BSc programmes, 18 learners had achieved a BSc (Hons) in care studies and 18 learners had achieved a BSc (Hons) in childhood studies. Of these, 11 got a first class degree, 12 a 2:1, 12 a 2:2 and one a third class degree. One of the learners also gained the highest marks in the first year in the School of Care Science at the partner HEI to which the programmes belonged.

Take action

You might be thinking that this is the right time to consider expanding existing or starting some new HE provision. If so, can you be confident that you have:

- appropriate facilities to create the right environment for your HE students?
- appropriately qualified staff and/or the resources and/or the commitment to invest in your staff's CPD to up skill them to deliver at HE level?
- the potential demand for HE in your area and, if so, that you understand the subject areas?
- the right relationship with the partner HEI that balances delivery flexibility with rigour and support?

A two-tier system?

Some colleagues who read about this research thought it was discriminatory and unethical to offer superior or 'elite' facilities to HE students in an FE environment. What do you think? Contribute to the debate at <http://tinyurl.com/insideevidenceforum>

Evidence source

Griffiths, C. & Golding Lloyd, M. (2009) Degree of success? A review of delivering BSc Honours degrees in an FE college. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 33(4), pp.483-492.

The researchers (two of the lecturers on the BSc programmes) conducted a literature review and used the findings from research to inform their practice.