Access 'Cinderellas': further education colleges as engines of transformational change

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Introduction

There has been a growing governmental emphasis placed on improving levels of social mobility (Social Mobility Commission, 2017, 2019). Moreover, HE is seen as playing a pivotal role in this ambition - not only in increasing the numbers gaining higher-level skills but in closing the gap in HE access between those from different socio-economic backgrounds. One government funded initiative for tackling such inequalities is Uni Connect, previously known as the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP). Established in 2017, Uni Connect involves 29 consortia of local universities and schools, as well as FECs, providing access support to young people residing in neighbourhoods where HE participation rates are poor and lower than expected given levels of attainment at school. The initiative's stated aim is to support the government's social mobility goals by increasing the number of young people from under-represented groups who go into higher education (Office for Students, 2020a).

The first year review of NCOP (Tazzyman et al, 2018) drew attention to the limited role that colleges have so far played in this collective endeavour. Indeed, with echoes of the Cinderella label that was first linked to the FE sector in the 1980s (Randle and Brady, 1997), colleges are presented as junior partners to universities, and as the recipients rather than initiators of access practices and interventions. Whilst recent figures indicate that progress in widening HE access is being made, they also suggest that the access gap is closing at a rather modest pace (Corver, 2018; TES Reporter, 2020). This has led the Office for Students (OfS), the government's HE

regulator, to call for a 'transformational change' in tackling university progression differentials (OfS, 2020b). Whilst the OfS provides little explanation of how such change might be instituted, or what it involves, this article assesses the potential for FE colleges to emerge from the shadows and become the instruments for such change.

Methods and approach

The chapter adopts a two-phased approach in its exploration of the capability of FECs to shed the Cinderella mantel and take on a pivotal role in transforming the access landscape.

Part 1

The first part of this chapter reports on the findings from a workshop discussion facilitated by the chapter's authors, Raven, Webber-Jones and Baldwin. This took place at the 2019 FACE conference, which was held in Sheffield in June 2019. The workshop involved a dozen practitioners from a range of colleges and universities, as well as a number of NCOP consortia. A SWOT framework was used to structure a discussion around the proposition that FE colleges could be the engines for a transformational change. The SWOT framework was chosen in part because it is widely used in testing organisations (Phadermrod et al, 2016), whilst being simple to apply (Balamuralikrishna and Dugger, 1995). It has also been regularly deployed in the education sector (Lacey, 1996; Gibson and Purdy, 2012; School of Clinical Medicine, 2019; Raven, 2016).

In terms of its application, a SWOT analysis directs attention to the comparative strengths and weaknesses of an organisation or, in this case, a sector, along with the opportunities and threats it faces. The two former components relate to the internal environment that exits within an organisation (Institute for Manufacturing, 2019). Strengths are concerned with 'resources' and 'capabilities' (Institute for Manufacturing, 2019), whilst weaknesses comprise 'limitation[s], fault[s], or defect[s] in the organisation', that can prevent objectives from being achieved (Institute for Manufacturing, 2019). The latter two elements of the model address the external environment operating outside an organisation. Opportunities

have been described as 'favourable situation[s] in the organisation's [or sector's] environment', which 'usually' relate to 'a trend or change of some kind'. Meanwhile, threat[s] are 'unfavourable situation[s] in the environment that [are] potentially damaging to strategy' (Institute for Manufacturing, 2019).

Although not a widely used method of data collection, workshops have on occasion been deployed in the field of further and higher education (Ørngreen and Levinsen, 2017; Raven, 2018a). Ørngreen and Levinsen (2017: 79) argue that workshops can 'inspire new insight into the research domain in question' and, because of the levels of interaction involved, they can 'do so in ways that other research methods cannot'. Indeed, it is suggested that by providing an 'immersive and collaborative environment' they are able to create an 'opportunity to identify new factors at play and the relationships between them, which neither the participants nor the researchers may have been aware of prior to the workshop' (Ørngreen and Levinsen, 2017: 79). In terms of data capture, the feedback received from participants was summarised on a white board by one of the facilitators, whilst another member of the presentation team took more detailed notes.

In analysing the data generated in this workshop attention was paid to two criticisms that have been levelled at how SWOT results have been interpreted. Hill and Westbrook (1997: 46) drew attention to the first of these when noting instances where 'no attempt' has been made 'to verify any [of the] points' the model has raised. To counter this concern, a survey of the literature has been used to assess the validity of the workshop findings. A second criticism is identified by Dixon (2012), who discusses the tendency to present the results of this exercise as a simple 'checklist of items'. In order to avoid this - and to promote analysis - the study has sought to align each identified strength with its opposing weakness and in this way explore how weakness might be mitigated. The same approach has also been adopted with opportunities and threats, in order to consider how threats might be countered (Balamuralikrishna and Dugger, 1995).

Part 2

The second part of this paper provides more detailed, institutional-level insights by reporting on evidence gathered from one particular FE college. As Harrison et al (2017) point out, the use of this type of case study has increased and has resulted in a pragmatic, flexible approach to research that is capable of providing a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of a diverse range of issues across a number of disciplines. As Elliott and Crossley (1997) suggest, there is very little use made of such qualitative approaches in relation to research in further education and its use can be seen as an antidote to more managerial, statistical approaches. Whilst studies focused on a single organisation could be criticised for being too narrow, it is hoped that the approach adopted here will enable the reader to identify with the findings and draw parallels with their own experience.

That said, the research conducted on this particular college does not adopt a pure case study approach, as it also includes a substantial quantitative aspect. As Molina-Azorin (2016) points out, results obtained from different methods have the potential to enrich our understanding of problems and questions. In this respect, data analysis of the students who did or did not apply to higher education revealed that this institution returned unusually high levels of HE progression, including amongst learners from areas of educational deprivation (as measured using the most recent iteration of the Participation of Local Areas classification scheme, POLAR 4 (OfS, 2020c)).

In interpreting these findings, semi-structured interviews were held with programme leads, as well as a sample of the students involved. What these interviews reveal provides valuable insights into local and often individual staff practices. Whilst these activities are shown to be capable of making a difference to HE access rates at a departmental and even institutional level, they could, if more widely adopted, do so at sector level. Making a difference to HE access rates would confirm that colleges have the strengths and have the opportunities that could enable them to take on the mantel of engines of transformational change in HE access.

Findings

Part 1. The SWOT analysis

Strengths and weaknesses

Table 1 deals with the first two quadrants of the SWOT framework by summarising the findings from the workshop discussions that explored the strengths and weaknesses of the FE sector in advancing the access agenda. Table 1 also makes an initial attempt to analyse this feedback by aligning each strength with its corresponding weakness.

The first identified strength concerned the observation that FECs are significant recruiters of students from widening participation (WP) backgrounds. Underpinning this claim, Norris and Francis (2014) note that 'the majority of students' who attend FECs 'are known to belong to the bottom three socio-economic groups'. Likewise, Hill (2015: 1) observes that the local communities that colleges 'recruit' from and 'serve' are often those that possess 'a significant proportion of disadvantaged students'. Similarly, Martin (2017) and Bowl (2012: 12) talk about the

Table 1: The strengths and weaknesses of FECs to advance the access agenda

Strengths	Weaknesses
Significant recruiters of WP students	Large range of institutional objectives and indicators
Key providers of level 3 vocational courses	Lower progression rates to HE associated with vocational courses
Support infrastructure and expertise	Challenge of moving to a new institution
Teaching staff with HE experience*	Disconnection between FE and HE sections*
Lower HE course fees*	Limited HE provision*

*Strengths and weaknesses associated with FECs as dual providers (offering HE as well as FE)

ability of colleges to reach the 'hard to access' learners who might not otherwise engage in education and training.

However, HE progression is not one of the performance indicators used by colleges. Arguably, the nearest is the objective of ensuring 'sustained positive destinations'. However, as described by the Department for Education (2018: 5) this is a broader 'measure [that] shows the proportion of learners who progress to a sustained destination in learning or employment (or both) following completion of an eligible FE learning aim'.

The second identified strength relates to the role of FECs as the largest providers of vocational education in England. This workshop claim is confirmed in the literature. FE colleges are responsible for educating and training more students taking applied general and work-based courses than schools and sixth forms, including those at level 3 (HE entry level) (British Council 2017; Raven 2018b). Indeed, it can be argued that this and the first strength identified are interlinked, since vocational programmes tend to attract a larger proportion of students from under-represented backgrounds. (Shields and Masardo 2015: 5; Bowl 2012: 5; Lynch, Sims and Wespieser 2015: 26).

The corresponding weakness lies in the generally lower progression rates associated with both applied general and work-based courses (Higher Education Funding Council for England 2015: 4). Arguably, the combination of possessing a larger number of students from widening participation backgrounds and those taking vocational courses does much to explain Tazzyman et al's (2018: 24) findings that learners in FECs are less likely to have applied 'or report that they intend to apply' to HE than their sixth form counterparts, who are likely to be from affluent backgrounds and take the academic (A-level) pathway (see also Raven, 2019a).

The third strength relates to levels of support available at colleges to widening participation students (Raven, 2019b and 2019c). When compared to school sixth forms many colleges are able to offer more specialist support services, including those associated with careers guidance (Raven, 2019a).

However, this strength needs to be balanced against the challenge for new college arrivals in accessing this support when confronted with what, for many, is likely to be a very large and unfamiliar institution.

In addition, some studies have suggested that the HE progression support found in colleges is less effective than in schools. Gartland and Smith's study (2015: 3) suggests that sixth form students 'tend to be better informed, better prepared and more confident about progression to HE' than their FE college counterparts (see also Havergal, 2015). Similarly, Clark and Holt (2010) discuss evidence that FE students considering HE are critical of the lack of early information, advice and guidance in college. However, this might also relate to the scale and structure of FE programmes. Tazzyman et al. (2018: 38) discuss how some NCOP consortia reported finding it 'more challenging to engage with FECs compared to schools' because 'FEC learners have more independent and flexible timetables, and are often based across different campuses, which 'has implications for releasing learners from timetabled lessons to take part in outreach activity'.

The two further strengths and their associated weaknesses emerged from the workshop discussions. Both, it can be argued, relate to the unique role that colleges play as 'dual sector institutions' that provide FE as well as HE courses (Bowl, 2012: 3). The first of the resulting strengths concerns the idea that at least some of those teaching level 3 courses in FE colleges will also be involved in delivering HE programmes. From a progression perspective, it can be argued that these individuals are in a position to offer insights into HE study and advise and guide the level 3 students they teach (Raven 2019a, 2019b and 2019c).

However, the corresponding limitations suggest that this is unlikely to apply to all staff, and that there might be psychological as well as physical separation between college-based FE and HE, with staff based in different buildings and even different sites. In this respect, Bowl (2012: 15) notes that 'the assumption that HE in FE offers a seamless progression to higher level study has been questioned'. Here reference is made to 'the fact that FE and HE are subject to different funding regimes, [which] mean that there is likely to be a divide between FE and HE provision, even within

the same institution'. In addition, the way the HE curriculum is taught and assessed may be different and it is observed that 'there is some evidence to suggest that progression routes from level 3 to level 4 are not always clearly indicated in information provided to learners' (Bowl, 2012: 15).

The final strength discussed in the workshop concerned HE course fees, with colleges tending to charge lower fees than universities. Evidence gathered for a House of Commons report examining HE tuition fees confirmed this (House of Commons, 2018: 7). However, lower fees could mean less revenue and fewer resources for HE in FE and thus a poorer quality experience. Whilst there is little discussion of this in the literature, much consideration has been given to the impact of fees on levels of HE participation, especially amongst those from WP backgrounds. Whilst inconclusive, there is some evidence to suggest a significant level of inflexibility with fees, since it has been observed that the period of fee increases has not seen a decline for those from under-represented backgrounds progressing to HE (Coughlan, 2017).

Opportunities and threats

Whilst a consideration of strengths and weaknesses enables the internal dynamics of the FE sector to be examined, the external environment is addressed in the SWOT model through an exploration of opportunities and threats. As mentioned, although some reference was made to this dimension in the workshop presentation and discussion, much of the evidence presented here is derived from the authors' own insights and reflections. Between us, we are able to draw on many years of working in, and for, the sector, in strategic roles, as well as consultants and researchers.

One of the first opportunities we identified for FECs to advance the access agenda relates to the development and intended growth of work-based provision, most notably the expansion of higher and degree level apprenticeships (OfS, 2019b; Burke, 2018; Universities UK, 2019). With their links to local businesses, and in their established role as providers of vocational programmes, FECs are in a strong position to take advantage of this development. However, this opportunity is accompanied by a potential threat. A number of universities have been quick to develop HE apprenticeship programmes and, in a number of instances, can boast

superior facilities. There is also evidence that many of those enrolling on these courses are neither from WP or work-based backgrounds but are already in management and senior positions within the companies that are funding these programmes.

A second opportunity relates to the increasing emphasis, and importance, being placed by the government and, in turn, the OfS, on promoting applied general and work-based pathways to higher education (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, 2016). FECs have the potential to be in the vanguard of this move to ensure parity of esteem and facilitate progression via alternative routes, since they are important providers of vocational qualifications. However, significant challenges remain. Evidence suggests that there is a limited level of awareness amongst young people and those who provide guidance that qualifications such as BTECs are recognised as suitable HE entry qualifications (Raven, 2018b and 2018c; Pearson, 2020). Moreover, as discussed above, our experience is that some programme leaders of level 3 vocational programmes are not fully aware

Table 2: The opportunities and threats faced by FE colleges in advancing the access agenda

Opportunities	Threats
Expansion of work-based provision, including at HE level	Competition from universities
Promotion of vocational pathways into HE	Limited general awareness of these routes
The National Collaborative Outreach Programme and the importance of partnership working	Limited awareness and engagement amongst some FECs
Encourage vocational students from less sociology mobile backgrounds to access HE	Limited awareness by FE tutors of WP agenda and their role in encouraging WP with their Level 3 students

of the WP agenda and their role in encouraging students from poorer backgrounds to consider progressing to HE.

As NCOP, now in the guise of Uni Connect enters a new phase in its development, it affords, arguably, a further opportunity for FECs to play a key role in advancing the access agenda. Recent guidance to partnerships has underlined the importance of collaborative working, including between universities and their local FECs, whilst also emphasising the potential that colleges have for enhancing rates of progression amongst their own level 3 student populations (OfS, 2019c). The threat associated with this concerns the tendency of colleges not to recognise and take advantage of opportunities such as these. It is here that some form of CPD training, perhaps including a facilitated discussion framed by a SWOT analysis, might help to highlight the sector's strengths, as well as the opportunities that are available. Time is of the essence, however, as the recent history of collaborative outreach ventures has shown, these opportunities do not last for long (NCOP, 2020).

Whilst it can be argued that the findings from this SWOT exercise are of value in helping us to better understand the forces operating in and on the FE sector, the insights afforded remain general in nature. Questions remain over how realistic it is to imagine that colleges can take on the mantle of access game changers. The second part of this chapter seeks to address this question by reporting on the research that one of the authors has been conducting during the past three years at one particular FE college.

Part 2. The case study

The college in question is a medium sized FEC located in a market town in the East of England, which recruits from a larger urban centre, as well as a number of small towns and villages in the Lincolnshire and Cambridgeshire fens. Students recruited come from a very wide range of socio-economic backgrounds including deprived inner city and rural areas.

The first part of the study involved investigating the backgrounds of the students who had applied to the college during the previous three

years (2016/17 to 2018/19). In each of these years there were around 600 students in the second year of level 3 programmes, including A-levels and various vocational programmes (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, 2016).

The first finding from this analysis was that the proportion of students, usually about 290, who applied to HE institutions varied markedly across courses. In 2018/19, while 64 per cent of A-level students applied, as many as 92 per cent of BTEC Fashion and Clothing students and 100 per cent of BTEC Performing Arts Dance and Musical Theatre students applied to HE. However, only 23 per cent of those taking BTEC Public Services and 28 per cent of those on the CACHE Childcare course (also at level 3) completed applications. Part of the explanation for the variations amongst those on vocational routes is a perception, notably amongst Public Service and Childcare students that they could pursue careers in these areas without needing a higher education. The authors intend to conduct further research into these perceptions.

The educational backgrounds for each cohort of students on each of the college's final year level 3 courses was also considered using POLAR data. POLAR groups English census wards into five quintiles according to the proportion of young residents aged 18 and 19 progressing on to university-level study. Students' home postcodes can then be used to identify the quintile their neighbourhoods belong to. For this exercise, the most recent iteration of this classification scheme, POLAR 4 was used (OfS, 2020c). Typically, in a ward which falls into quintile 1 (the low participation grouping), about 15 per cent of young people will have progressed on to HE, whilst in quintile 5 wards about 55 per cent will have done so.

The average POLAR quintile for those on each course was calculated. This, it was judged, would give an indication of the typical census ward each group came from. In 2018/19, the course with the lowest average quintile score of 2.8 was the Level 3 BTEC in Music Technology, followed closely by the Fashion and Clothing and Football Development BTECs, both at 2.9. In contrast, the courses with the highest average quintile score were Public Services at 4.3 and Animal Management at 3.9.

Alongside the average quintile score, a figure was then produced for each course of those who had applied to HE and those who had not. The BTEC in Public Service, which had the highest number of students from higher participating neighbourhoods had, conversely, the lowest application rate to HE of 23 per cent. In contrast, whilst students on the Fashion and Clothing derived, on average, from some of the lowest participating quintile wards, they returned the second highest HE application rates. Similar patterns were observed for the data from 2016/17 and 2017/18. It would therefore appear that for this FE college there is little connection between the quintile wards a student comes from and the likelihood of them applying to higher education.

The same set of calculations were then performed for all level 3 students at the college over the same three-year period in order to discover whether at this wider institutional level there were links between students coming from a low HE participation area and their propensity to apply to HE. Tables 3 to 5 present the findings.

As with the more detailed course level findings, this college-wide analysis revealed no obvious associations between the POLAR quintile a student's home was located in and their propensity to apply to university level study. Whilst one might have expected application rates from those in quintiles 1 and 2 to be between 14 and 22 per cent, it was found that almost as many apply to HE from these quintiles as do from high

Table 3: Breakdown of applicants to HE by quintile 2018/19

Quintile	Number in level 3, year 2 cohort	Number applying to HE	Percentage from each quintile applying to HE
1	32	16	50
2	51	34	67
3	111	56	50
4	86	52	60
5	92	55	60

Table 4: Breakdown of applicants to HE by POLAR quintile 2017/18

Quintile	Number in level 3, year 2 cohort	Number applying to HE	Percentage from each quintile applying to HE
1	30	16	55
2	57	28	49
3	94	50	53
4	81	44	54
5	116	60	52

Table 5: Breakdown of applicants to HE by quintile 2016/17

Quintile	Number in level 3, year 2 cohort	Number applying to HE	Percentage from each quintile applying to HE
1	53	30	57
2	48	30	62.5
3	91	53	58
4	92	46	50
5	93	52	56

participation neighbourhoods. Indeed, in 2018/19 the highest percentage of applications came from quintile 2 students, at 67 per cent.

Interpretations

Why is it that students at this college who come from areas where HE participation is very low, apply to higher education institutions at the levels witnessed? It is not because they apply to the college's own HE courses - no correlation was found in this respect. In order to discover more the author interviewed programme leaders, student advisors and students

from quintile 1 and 2 areas. From these interviews, a number of possible explanations were identified:

- The college's catchment area and reputation

  The college is in a market town and recruits many more students than would be expected for such a small town but does so by marketing its courses widely, and does not dispel the view that its results are better than rival colleges and sixth forms. It deliberately markets itself as a friendlier, more caring institution than its competitors.

  Students from quintile 1 and 2 areas told the author that they believe the college is 'better' than their local college. Such students would appear to be more motivated because they have to pay for transport to get to the college and leave home earlier than they would need to if they attended a local sixth form institution.

- The role of programme leads

  On examining two programmes in more depth, the programme leader for the Fashion and Textile course explained how he informed students at the beginning of their two-year level 3 course that to be successful in the fashion industry they would need to gain a degree. There was then an expectation amongst students and staff that all the students would apply to university and, consequently, it was noted, almost all did.

  In contrast, at a recent presentation on social mobility given by two of the authors at this college, the team leader for Public Services explained that he did not encourage students to apply for university because they could always rise through the ranks in the armed forces.

- The role of student advisors

  More generally, it was found that each course at the college is assigned a student advisor who meets with their group weekly. For those on level 3 programmes, these advisors generally begin to prepare their students for the UCAS (university application) process before the end of the first year. Moreover, every student is expected to register with UCAS unless they have a very good reason for not doing so. As part of this

support, two higher education carers/advisors meet with every group to explain the UCAS process, check students' personal statements and provide one-to-one advice.

As a personal aside, the author works part-time at this case study college and has had success with students in the past who have been wary of applying to HE because of their backgrounds and concerns about fees. However, it was found that with close support and guidance they did apply, and in many instances secured places and subsequently graduated. Sometimes, it appears that it only takes a nudge - at the right time and in the right way - to make a significant and positive difference.

Conclusion

Some of the factors considered in the case study analysis may well be unique to the particular college profiled, and certainly more research is needed with different sizes of colleges in both urban and rural locations. This is something the authors intend to do. However, in light of the findings from the SWOT analysis, it can be argued that some of the lessons learned from this case study could well be applicable to other colleges.

As many colleges have fees for their full-time HE courses set at more than the OfS minimum fee rate, they are required to produce access and participation plans, which detail how the extra funding received will be spent on widening participation activities (OfS, 2020d). This money can be directed towards access interventions as well as on support for those who have already embarked on HE courses. From what has been discussed, a strong case can be made for colleges to allocate some of this resource to the progression support that course leaders and student advisors can offer to WP students on pre-HE courses at their own colleges.

The workshop held at last year's FACE conference, where the SWOT analysis was conducted, points to the potential value that a CPD training event for college leaders, tutors and support staff could offer in exploring and sharing good progression practice (Hill, 2015). It is also in this context that senior college managers could be reminded of the

benefits of advancing the access agenda and shown how to recognise the opportunities that are available for FE colleges to achieve this objective.

In the story Cinderella gets to the ball, meets the prince and lives happily ever after. Perhaps the notion of greater training, engagement, understanding and, critically, inter- and intra-sector collaboration could provide the 'fairy godmother' elements needed to enable FE to transform the access landscape.

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