

Higher Expectations: An Analysis Of The Perception Gap Of Higher Education Students In A Further Education College

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Higher Education in Further Education institutions often are perceived by students as having a lower quality than offerings from traditional Higher Education institutions. This project argues that by understanding the expectations of students, it is possible to increase their satisfaction. Using focus group and semi-structure interviews, this report suggests that it is essential to create separation between the Higher Education identity and provision from that of the Further Education experience in order to increase student satisfaction. It also argues that marketing strategies should emphasise the strengths of this provision in a realistic and targeted way to help contribute to the formulation of the students' expectations to help increase student satisfaction.

Keywords: Higher Education; Higher Education Institution; Further Education College; Student expectations; Partnership Colleges; Student Satisfaction.

Introduction

Further Education Colleges (FEC's) that offer Higher Education (HE) programs are under constant pressure to ensure that they are providing a high quality and cost-effective service to their students (Darlaston-Jones *et al*, 2003). This has led to competition between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), including FECs, to attract and retain their students. Due to this pressure, HE in FE providers are increasingly trying to improve the quality of their service to prevent student dissatisfaction and increase student retention rates. Student frustration often arises from the disparities

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between their expectations of the course and the perception of the quality of their learning experience (Borghi *et al*, 2016). The increasing consumerist orientation in HE students' perception of the educational experience means greater importance should be placed on identifying, meeting, and managing these needs (James, 2002). There is a dearth of information surrounding what the expectations of a student who studies HE in an FE environment, or what causes them to generate those thoughts. This report argues that student perceptions of quality can be improved by understanding what students expect from their provision and meeting these expectations. As a result of better meeting these expectations, HE in FE providers will be better placed to both retain their students, protect their recruitment streams from traditional HEI and expand their provision to meet the growing demand for different forms of Higher Education. To do this, this report suggests that it is essential to create a greater HE identity within a FEC environment and highlights the importance of marketing strategies in formulating the expectations of students and suggests that these should be focusing on the unique benefits of a HE in FE approach rather than selling a traditional HEI experience. Using interview and focus group data from a selection of level 4 courses at City College Norwich, this report suggests that students do not have a monolithic set of expectations and therefore require different responses to ensure they feel that they are being met. It will begin with a discussion of the surrounding literature of HE in FE and student satisfaction.

Literature Review

Higher Education in Further Education Colleges

Although Higher Education is an area that has received a lot of focus within the academic literature, the focus has often been on traditional HEIs, most noticeably

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universities. However, there has been a lack of research conducted around the provision of Higher Education within Further Education (FE) institutions (Rapley, 2012). The term Further Education was first officially noted in 1917, however, very little has been written about its history (Richardson, 2007). FE rose in popularity after World War II (WW2) when there was a high demand for new skills (Feather, 2011). Prior to WW2 less than 2% of 18-year-olds were studying university courses (Rapley, 2012). By the 1960s FE was seen as a second chance for young people to develop the vocational skills they needed after leaving school without the qualifications they required. This was also seen in the form of evening classes offered to adults who wanted to do further study (Feather, 2011). Historically, it was common to see universities being the sole providers of undergraduate and postgraduate education, while FECs were the providers of adult and vocational programmes of study (Rapley, 2012). The removal of control of Polytechnic education from Local Education Authorities (LEAs) under the 1986 Education Act resulted in their privatisation and incorporation (Rapley, 2012). This provided the base for the Further and Higher Education Act that enabled colleges to become financially independent in 1992, this forced colleges to compete in a quasi-market defined by 'marketisation' and 'managerialism' (Smith, 2007). The Dearing report of 1997 encouraged the expansion of HE and the introduction of tuition fees in England. In response, Higher Education in Further Education (HE in FE) was swiftly developed in collaboration with partnership HEIs and was at the forefront of the employability and widening participation agendas, helping to alleviate some of the inequalities being noted in post-compulsory education and training (Parry and Thompson, 2002).

In 1999, Tony Blair stated that he wanted to increase the participation of young people in HE by 50% before 2007, to eliminate the skills gaps being seen in Britain. The

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government wanted to end separatism in secondary education and to meet the growing demand for HE courses, this led to the conception of the White Paper in 2003 ‘the future of Higher Education’ (DfES, 2003; Rapley, 2012). The White Paper highlighted the importance of enabling the participation of underrepresented groups into HE. The Future of Higher Education policy outlines the government’s commitment to increase the number of 18 to 30-year-olds engaging in HE, and it was noted that FE played an important role in that outcome (Harwood and Harwood, 2004; Turner *et al*, 2009). To strengthen the links between FE and HE, Further Education Colleges (FECs) became the major providers of Foundation Degrees, Higher National Diplomas and Higher National Certificates. An important step in this process was the generation and validation of HE programmes that FE staff at partnerships colleges would deliver (Harwood and Harwood, 2004). This saw a hybrid of previously distinctly separate sectors, creating HE in FE. The participation of 18-year-olds in undergraduate courses rose from 2% to 47% by 2011, 10% of this number accounted for HE in FE provision (Rapley, 2012). The White Paper of 2011 ‘Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System’ and the second White Paper of 2011 ‘New Challenges, New Chances: Further Education and Skills System Reform Plan’ sought to provide a wider range of HE programmes from a greater number of HE providers, it also aimed to improve the image of the Higher Level Apprenticeships by offering lower fees for these courses than the £9000 seen at HEIs for degree programmes (Stoten, 2016). The demographic profile of typical FE in HE student is one who is a mature learner, in employment, living with family and looking for a career change (Rapley, 2012).

However, HE in FE was often provided in very different institutions with significantly different cultures. Culture is a commonly accepted set of values and meanings within an organisation (Simmons, 2003). An organisation can often develop its own personality

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and become an entity, realistically this culture comes from an amalgamation of all the individuals who are associated with it, which in turn can feed into its reputation (Rollinson, 2005). Due to the differences in the inception of HEIs and FECs, there is a clear cultural divide between them (Feather, 2011). The modern-day culture associated with the word ‘university’ is connected to the ‘Oxbridge model’, leading to a perception that this is a higher quality and better experience than studying HE in a non-university setting (Feather, 2011). At the forefront of this divide is the fact that traditional HEI’s have autonomy and FECs do not (Lea and Simmons, 2012). Corporation-owned FECs need external bodies to validate their curriculum offer, and they award the qualifications of external organisations. Conversely, universities are the validating bodies, they write their own curriculums and grant their own awards. Externally set criteria are used to inspect quality at FECs, such as those set by Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), whereas universities use a peer review system to inspect themselves against internally set aims and objectives (Lea and Simmons, 2012).

HE taught at FECs is further divided from other HEIs due to its close connections with FE culture, with both HE and FE being taught on the same site, causing the evolution of a hybrid institution (Parry and Thompson, 2002; and Parry *et al*, 2003). The Department of Education and Skills (2006) acknowledged that FE is overregulated with exaggerated micromanagement. Since The Further and Higher Education Act 1992, FECs have become increasingly managerialist, with commercial concerns being at the forefront of decision-making. The benchmarks for FECs are now set against business centred criteria rather than the needs of the client, an increasing concern seen in the public sector (Lea and Simmons, 2012). Feather (2011) writes that FECs are often treated like production lines for students, with management using the lecturing staff as production operatives driven by efficiency and results. Because of the close connection to FE,

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FECs can often struggle to develop an HE culture, or a feeling of 'HE-ness' for their students. The HE in FE experience is tainted by the historical notion of the 'real' HE experience being that which is taught in a university, leaving FECs unable to compete with HEIs in developing 'HE-ness'. FECs should strive to provide a distinctive HE experience promoting their unique selling points, rather than trying to compete with HEIs in providing an equivalent experience (Creasey, 2013). The Higher Education Funding Council for England generated a good practice guide for FECs that deliver HE to enable them to provide a distinctive HE experience, however, this also outlined the concerns current drawbacks, including high staff teaching hours and lack of staff research time, have on the student experience (HEFCE, 2003).

A number of issues have arisen from trying to merge HE course delivery into an FE cultured setting, for example; the disparities between FE and HE quality systems, HE teaching being structured into FE timetables, mixed economy teaching, and a lack of time to conduct research (Harwood and Harwood, 2004). HE in FECs is delivered in an FE style, rather than being made to meet the needs of the HE learners (Feather, 2011). FE and HE are governed by differing quality systems such as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and OFSTED, this creates a blurred boundary between FE teaching and HE teaching creating confusion for the staff at FECs, whilst also having implications for the experience of the HE students who want a feeling of 'HE-ness' from their provision. This also means the way in which staff perceive quality at FECs will differ from the parameters set at HEIs further creating a divide between FECs and HEIs (Creasy, 2013). Due to being employed on FE contracts, many HE lecturers in FECs are contracted to undertake the same number of teaching hours as their FE colleagues. For many this can be more than 27 hours per week, leaving the HE staff unable to meet the wider demands of their lecturing role (Turner *et al*, 2009; Lea and Simmons, 2012). Many of these same

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staff members also had to undertake programme management, which increased their contractual responsibilities to include activities such as employer engagement, administrative paperwork, course marketing and student recruitment. This limits their ability to develop their HE lecturer identity by not allowing them time to engage in continuing professional development. On top of this HE in FE lecturers also had to meet the demands of their non-traditional student demographic, which often involved varied teaching styles to meet a wider learning demand and pastoral support for a range of associated social issues. HE lecturers often feel that the FEC's management relies on the individual to research and continuing professional development in their own time, whilst also meeting the demands of their HE course (Lea and Simmons, 2012). Feather (2011) summarise this issue as follows *"they only teach, and undertake no research, and as such, this could be seen as 'dumbing down' degrees, so that students can pass qualifications easier"*. It could be argued that these fundamental issues are driving the public's perception that HE in FE is a lesser quality qualification and experience in comparison to University taught degrees (Lea and Simmons, 2012).

HE is being driven by data derived benchmarks and is becoming more like the core values of FE. League tables are focused on quantifiable student success, such as student retention, achievement and employability, terms that are historically familiar to the FE ethos (Lea and Simmons, 2012). This is quantified using data collection tools such as the HE National Student Survey (NSS). Traditional HEI's have begun to focus more on student support, an area that HE in FE has traditionally excelled in. Greenbank (2007) found that the FEC environment was more able to support a model of greater student support due to staff being readily available throughout the day, something that was not seen at the traditional HEI. HE in FE is often more adaptable to these changes, as the HE lecturers at FECs are more acquainted with this way of working. Lea and Simmons

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(2012) argue that the greater level of support found at FECs help support the atypical students that apply to undertake a HE in FE course. HE in FE cohorts are also smaller than the traditional HEI cohorts, this enables the HE in FE lecturers to generate a more supportive relationship with their students, something that students have cited as being one of the main reasons for their success (Hodkinson *et al*, 2007). The size differences between HEI and HE in FE cohorts also means that the course content is delivered in different ways. Traditionally, HEIs lecture to their students, whereas HE in FE can be delivered in a variety of novel ways such as group work and practical work (Turner *et al*, 2009). Research conducted by Ranzetta (2007) established that HE in FE provided a different, not necessarily worse, experience than that of an HEI. Ranzetta also noted that FECs tend to employ lecturers that hold a teaching qualification, in comparison to HEIs where they did not. This positively emphasises the HE in FE lecturer's ability to teach, in comparison to the HEIs who place more importance on the lecturer's ability to conduct research and communicate the findings (Leahy, 2012). There are insinuations that HE in FE lecturers 'spoon feed' their students in order to enhance achievement data, however, Leahy (2012) argues that the improved student performance may be due to the fact that students studying in an FEC get more support, greater supervision, more teaching time and may work harder due to the nature of the learner they recruit.

Jones (2006) conducted research that was concerned with the HE ethos in FECs and how this correlated with student engagement. Jones was particularly interested in how the HE students were represented at an institutional level. They concluded that HE students in an FEC needed to be separated from the FE students in order to generate a real HE environment for them. Greater research is needed into what would generate the appropriate HE environment for students studying HE in FE. This includes areas such as the impact of separate spaces from FE, such as common rooms, have on creation of

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an HE identity. In addition to this it also needs to be investigated what impact social activities such as clubs, bars and sporting events have on the generation of an HE ethos in an FEC (Ranzetta, 2007; Leahy, 2012). Ranzetta (2007) noted from their case study that students prioritised the friendly, welcoming and adult approach staff had towards them and the supportive learning environment. This research also argued that the staff's perception of the required HE social environment was based on historical ideals, whereas the current HE student doesn't have the time or resources to undertake social or extracurricular activities, as they are often mature and work full time.

Student Expectations, Experience and Satisfaction at HE in FE providers

A HEI or HE in FE?

A significant point within the academic literature is that HE in FE students are often different from those who attend a traditional HEI. The modern HE student has to juggle a range of personal, social and employment priorities alongside their programme of study. This means they have to choose a HE course that meets both their academic and personal needs (Crisp *et al*, 2009). There is a diverse array of reasons why students enrol on to different HE programmes and there is also a complex list of reasons as to why they choose to continue or discontinue their studies (Zepke, 2006). Crisp *et al* (2009) asked students why they chose their programme of study and they found four key themes: improving job prospects, interest in the subject area, family expectations, and developing talents and creative abilities. The response rate for each theme differed above the average depending on the subject of study, for example music students cited 'family expectations' above the average, whereas economic students cited 'improving job prospects' above the average. These findings correlate with those of Phinney *et al* (2006) who found that the choice to enrol on a HE course were to boost career

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prospects, expand their learning, to move away from home, and to enhance their social lives. Although first year HE students expected to have active and exciting social lives, this was not the main reason specified for their choice to start studying their course (Lowe and Cook, 2003). Money *et al* (2017) stated that students often started studying at university to give themselves a new start and to enable themselves to develop their skills and knowledge within their subject area.

Parry *et al* (2012) conducted research into what motivates students to study at a HE level for both traditional HEI and those studying at HE in FE providers. They found that students studying at a HEI were mainly focused on improving their employment prospects upon the completion of the course. In comparison, students who opted to study HE at an FEC had differing motivation such as lower tuition fees, greater contact time with staff, having already studied at the college and being familiar with the environment. A key finding of this 2012 study was *“most often, students’ decision to opt for a college was driven by their perception that the courses they wanted to take were only available at a college”*. This suggests that the students are not basing their decision to study HE in FE because of the reputation of the establishment or any perceptions about the value of the different experience (Stoten, 2016). Students studying HE in FE often cite childcare needs and working commitments as reasons for studying at the establishment, as the FEC environment is more relaxed and flexible for them. Stoten (2016) concluded that FECs were appealing to HE students because they offered high levels of support, smaller class sizes and a better environment for those who were not able to cope with crowded spaces.

Expectations and effective transitions from FE to HE

Prior to starting a HE course, non-mature students will typically only have had experience of a school or college environment. The transition from school/college

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environment to an HEI environment can be challenging for both the student and the lecturing staff, students often state that this transition is a source of anxiety for them (Hassel and Ridout, 2018). Failure to adapt to this required transition often leads to student distress, poor academic achievement and a high probability of withdrawal from study (Yorke and Longden, 2004). Students who are at high risk of struggling to transition to HE study include mature learners with children, underrepresented ethnic minorities and students who are the first generation within the family to attend an HEI (Briggs *et al*, 2012). It is a Teaching and Excellence Framework (TEF) benchmark to ensure that students are encouraged to study from a range of different backgrounds, as well as ensuring that institutions are supporting these students to prevent them dropping out and facilitating their progression (Hassel and Ridout, 2018). A key factor in how easily a student can undertake transition from school/college to university is how large the gap is between their expectations of HE and the reality of the experience after they enrol (Smith and Wertlieb, 2005). There is significant evidence to suggest that students start a HE course with unrealistic expectations of what the experience will entail and are unprepared for HE level study. They move from a tightly controlled teacher led learning environment to being expected to independently take responsibility for their learning (Murtagh, 2010). The discrepancies between their expectations and reality sets the tone for their experiences in the first year.

In turn, their perceived experience in the first year of study plays a significant role in shaping their performance in the following years of study (Hassel and Ridout, 2018). Inaccurate perceptions of the university study experience before starting the course are correlated with social and academic disengagement, poor academic performance, lack of social and personal development, and student retention. Therefore, there is a sector requirement to ensure that students are better, and more realistically, prepared for HE

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level study. Secondary teachers need to communicate more effectively with their students about the realities of progressing onto tertiary education and HEIs need to have a way of better preparing their incoming students about the academic and social elements of the course they are enrolling onto (Lowe and Cook, 2003).

The information that students receive about the HE experience is known to influence their decision to start a HE course at a specific university. However, they often underestimate the financial implications and time commitments the course requires, meaning it is misaligned with their initial expectations (Nadelson *et al*, 2013). Kuh *et al* (2005) found that a range of cognitive and psychological factors determined a student's expectations of their HE course. Most commonly these factors included the student's perception of their own ability to achieve the grade they wanted, educational objectives, their motivation to study, and any preestablished attitudes towards university. A study by Crisp *et al* (2009) investigated the expectations students had of their university course in their first year of study. They found that students thought lecturers would be readily available to support them and that this would be crucial to their success. Other key findings were that students expected lecturers to read their draft work and provide detailed feedback prior to the official assessment deadline. They expected assessments to be marked and returned quickly, with 57% of students expecting this to be less than three weeks and 34% expecting it to be within one week of submission. Most students also expected to spend 11 hours or less a week studying independently. Money *et al* (2017) also conducted a study into university student expectations and found some similar results, students were expecting a greater amount of support and they found that students were unaware of the support services that were available to them. This research also outlined that the students placed a high value on developing relationships with peers and university staff. It was important to students to be able to juggle social, work

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and family commitments alongside their course and that they expected staff support and a timetable that enabled them to achieve this. Lowe and Cooke (2003) documented that two thirds of students expected to have issues with their academic skills and writing, when they followed this up it was seen that 50% of students did struggle academically and many reported that they found it hard to study independently.

King and Widdowson (2009) infer that a HE student would expect a quality service for the tuition fees they pay. They examine that students are paying customers who wish to deepen their knowledge. They argue that these students are expecting a similar quality of service to that of any other business in the commercial sector and are investing in their future careers. Hassel and Ridout (2018) write that the increase in student tuition fees is leading to an ever-growing consumerist culture within university applicants and that this is also now shaping their expectations. In addition to the experience they are expecting, students are now also wanting “value for money” (Money *et al*, 2017). HEIs are quickly becoming seen not only as educational institutions but businesses who must demonstrate excellence, quality outcomes and cost effectiveness (Darlaston-Jones *et al*, 2003). Due to the increasing marketisation of HE, service quality and student satisfaction are now key priorities for HEIs. In HEIs, service quality is largely defined as the ability of the organisation to meet or exceed the students’ expectations. Service quality is also closely related to student satisfaction, which is the severity of the gap between the student’s pre-service expectations of the university and the perception of the university post-service (Tsiligiris and Hill, 2019). The service quality of an HEI is monitored through Institutional surveys and the NSS, good service quality will see HEIs progress through league tables and help them to better recruit students (Tsiligiris *et al*, 2022). As potential HE in FE students are more likely to be conscious of the need for

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quality outcomes and value, these pressures are even more pronounced for HE in FE providers.

The student's expectations of the experience that should be provided as part of a HE course can hold a great deal of importance in the student's level of satisfaction with their course (Emanuel and Adams, 2006). If an HEI is not investigating their students' expectations when they are applying for their courses, establishments are increasing the risk of students being dissatisfied with the service they provide. Meeting the student's expectations of their Higher Education experience can motivate the learner and make them loyal to the establishment, this in turn can be translated into student success (Borghi *et al*, 2016). However, the sources of student expectations are often underappreciated and have so far received little discussion within the context of a Further Education environment. By focusing on the process of the generation of expectations and understanding how students assess whether these are being met the HEI will be better placed to increase student satisfaction (Emanuel and Adams, 2006). It is therefore essential to examine what feeds into the initial perception of the Higher Education experience and how this can be properly managed to ensure student satisfaction and success within the FEC environment.

Expectations management as student satisfaction

Stevenson *et al* (2006) used principles outlined in business to suggest that student satisfaction is largely correlated to meeting or exceeding student expectations (Parasuramen *et al*, 1985). In Figure 1, the model suggests a process of quality assurance that begins with diagnosing student expectations before developing a coordinated plan to address feedback. This not only identifies what the students are looking for but ensures they feel ownership of their learning environment. By creating this ownership, Chan *et al* (2014) argue that it allows student satisfaction to be moved

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away from a short term ‘please the customer’ approach and instead emphasises that students feel they are belonging to a community that listens whilst ensuring they are still receiving a quality education. When the academic staff do not engage in the process of creating ownership through communication, there is discrepancy between staff and student perceptions of quality (Borghi *et al*, 2016).

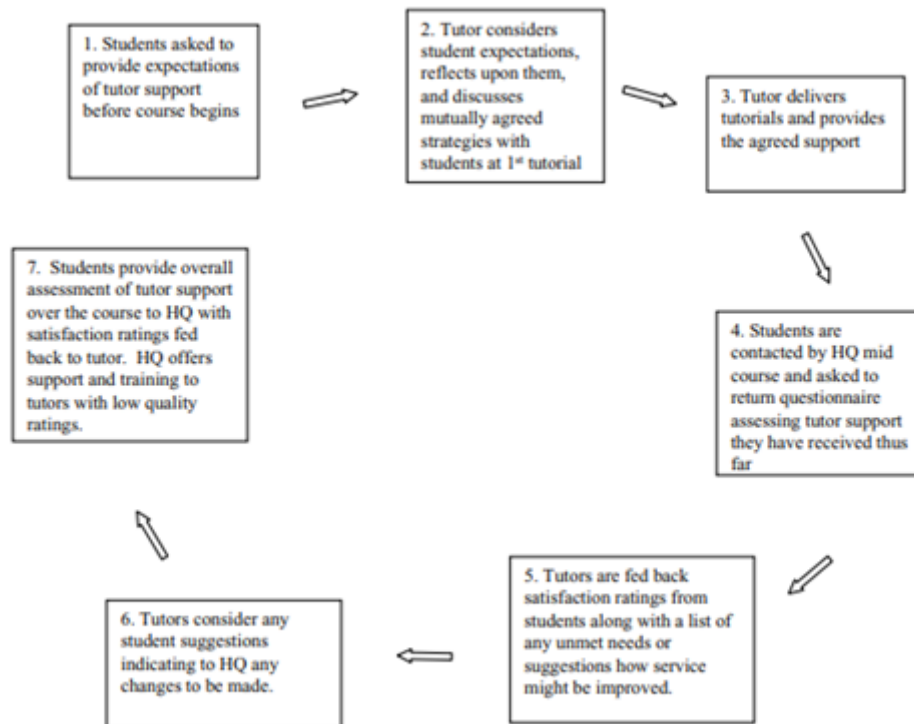


Figure 1: The seven-step student quality assurance model (Stevenson *et al.*, 2006).

It is important to note what criteria students rank highest in their expectations of the learning experience. A mismatch between these key expectations and the reality of the experience they receive can have consequences on student outcomes, motivation, satisfaction, and student retention. James (2002) states that “*the higher education process not only shapes student expectations, the education process is itself influenced*

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by the character of these expectations". Currently there is a significant gap in the ability of HEI institutions to both measure and resolve barriers to meeting expectations in a FEC environment due to a lack of effective research. This research gap significantly misses a large minority of students (1 in 12) who attend FEC's (Matthew, 2012; Rapley, 2013). Student expectations can be driven by many factors such as: age, gender, demographic, culture, and mode of university study (Sander *et al*, 2000). This is particularly important in FEC's that offer Land Based vocational higher education due to their atypical student demographics and therefore differing student expectations. Along with both the public and traditional university higher education providers perception that FECs are somehow of a lesser quality, it is important that FECs can impact, meet and exceed students' expectations to allow the different advantages to be accurately assessed. Not only will this allow FEC's to ensure students feel they are receiving a quality experience, it will also allow more tailored recruitment approach that will maximise student returns (Maringe, 2006). Overall, this literature review has indicated that by more accurately assessing student expectations, FEC's can more effectively recruit, retain, and satisfy students over the course of their degree programs.

Methods

Three primary research questions were developed to aid in understanding of the gap between the students' expectations and experience of the HE provisions within the FE college:

- 1) What are students' expectations when enrolling on a HE in FE course?
- 2) To what extent do the students' experiences align with their expectations at the start of the course?

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3) How can the gap (or lack of it) be addressed for future improvement of the students' experience?

To answer these questions qualitative case study research design will be applied. The case study enables a holistic understanding of a particular individual, group or institution (Bryman, 2016; Lopo and Gurney, 2013). The case study is commonly used for a qualitative inquiry in social sciences and education as it enables the researcher to explain contextualized experiences of a real-life situation (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2009). The case institution of City College Norwich (a Further and Higher Education College in the UK) was selected primarily for instrumental and convenience reasons. The researchers are all staff members at City College Norwich and teach (or have taught) across the programmes within the focus groups. The overarching goal of the research was to help improve student satisfaction to ensure higher retainment and to improve recruitment.

Data was collected in two stages: 1) focus groups were used to conduct preliminary research informing the interview protocol at the later stage; 2) semi-structured interviews were conducted to address three research questions asked in this study. Focus groups are often used as an auxiliary research method, where multiple forms of data can be used to build a research base (Cheng, 2014). As such, the purpose of using the interviews following the focus groups is three-fold. Firstly, the focus group acts as a 'sorting' device that allows those with strong views to become visible within the participant pool and allows the researcher to develop their own approaches. Secondly, it allows a greater depth to the research given, allowing more follow up questions to help develop the analysis (Owen, 2014). Finally, the interviewing portion will allow ideas generated from within later focus groups to be 'taken back' into the process and allow a cross-pollination of ideas and themes to be discussed.

Focus group

A focus group was chosen for this research as it is a good way to gather detailed information from students about their experiences in an educational environment (Breen, 2007). This method also allowed students to share their expectations and compare these with each other. A focus group enables the researcher to observe how the participants generate meaningful discussions, allowing them to develop deeper and more detailed responses to questions asked. It also allows for the researcher to hear the reasoning behind the responses, which is often not gained in a 1-2-1 structured interview (Kleiber, 2003). A focus group is a good way to explore the values, experiences and expectations within a group of individuals, it also allows for the discussions to be led in new directions unforeseen by the researcher (Field, 2000). Following the Pitchers and Holland's (2002) study, students were selected through convenience sampling. Three focus groups from six different programs at level 4 were carried out. These were designated *Public Sector Focus Group* (which contained the BA (Hons) Professional Policing and BA (Hons.) Public Sector Leadership degree programs), *Animal Focus Group* (which contained the BSc (Hons) Animal Science, BSc (Hons) Zoology and BSc (Hons) Wildlife and Conservation degree programs) and *Sports Focus Group* (which contained the BSc (Hons) Sports, Health and Exercise Science degree program). A semi-structured method was adopted to allow for ease of repeatability between different focus groups and to ensure that all focus groups started with the same presuppositions (Breen, 2007). A semi structured approach still gave scope to elicit detailed responses from students based on their experiences (Rapley, 2014). The students were asked to brainstorm and make up a list of their expectations of the HE experiences when they accepted their place on the undergraduate course. They were asked to rank this list according to the importance of these expectations.

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Once completed, they were asked to consider how these expectations have changed since they started the course and why.

To remove participant bias, students were asked open-ended non-leading questions. In addition to this, all students were encouraged to participate equally, and a lead-in question was used to try to prevent shyness bias (Nyumba et al, 2018). To eliminate bias associated with power imbalances in working relationships, each focus group was run by a researcher who did not teach the students within the focus group (Money et al, 2017). Each focus group lasted 60-90mins and was recorded using a Dictaphone, so verbal communication could be analysed. In this study non-verbal communication was not of interest to the research, meaning that a video recording wasn't needed, which allowed for better anonymity for the student participants (Kleiber, 2003). Once the data was collected thematic analysis was performed, as this 'process of combining codes to summarize findings in a coherent and meaningful way' (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik, 2021, p. 1364) provided key themes that can be explored through more in-depth interviews.

Interviews

Following the focus groups data, the in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted. Interview is a useful tool "for obtaining rather detailed information about educational topic or topics that are not directly observable in selected individuals involved in the sample by asking questions directly to the respondent" (Huseyin, 2009). In a semi-structured interview, the researcher has a general framework of themes whilst still allowing the participant space to give unexpected information and unexpected themes to develop as the interview goes along (Mashuri et al., 2022). This technique also enables a researcher to 'authentically' utilize ethical questioning and by ensuring

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connectivity, reciprocal information sharing and rapport-building between researcher and participant, it provides the opportunity to ensure that the participants feel comfortable within the research process (Brown and Danaher, 2019). Five semi structured interviews were conducted. Participants were recruited using the purposive sampling, as it enabled ‘a balance between representing individuals with the most knowledge of the subject matter and those who can provide different perspectives’ and it ensured that participants met ‘certain criteria of interest’ (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik, 2021, p. 1361). Therefore, all participants were recruited based on their previous participation in focus groups from various courses. There were four female and one male participants. They ranged between mature learners (n=2), internal (n=2) and external (n=3) progressors. Two participants had additional learning needs, and two had studied HE at another institution before City College Norwich. This sample enabled an analysis of the expectations and experience for the courses from different perspectives. Each interview took on average 30 minutes and was recorded with a Dictaphone or the online software Microsoft Teams. Once the data was collected, all interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed. To ensure credibility and rigor data was analysed by two coders, which both independently analysed the interviews and then discussed their findings and agreed on the final themes (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik, 2021).

Results

Having now discussed the literature surrounding the role of HE within the FE environment and how students perceive the advantages of studying in these institutions, this results section will use a thematic analysis of the student interviews and focus groups. There were three main themes that resulted within from this. The first theme is that often students perceived that they were going to have a different experience from a traditional HEI institution and often this perception either portrayed the expectations of

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a 'less' HE-ness experience and one of lower quality due to a mix of lower UCAS tariffs, the closeness to FE culture and the lack of a research-based approach. Secondly, the students largely found that experience was better than their initial perceptions, especially for students with SEN and non-traditional backgrounds (mature and students who have previously studied at other HE institutions). Finally, the students wanted to create a greater difference in identity with the college that focused on the differential between HE and FE spaces, both physical and communicatively.

What are students' expectations when enrolling on a HE in FE?

A central theme when asking about the students' expectations during the interviews and focus groups was that the students had different expectations of a HE course within an FE college. For a few, they were unsure of what they were expecting. For example, Participant 2 suggested that they *"had no comparison other than like the stereotypical rumours of university, like you know, thousand of people thing"* (Participant 2, 2023). Similarly, this lack of certainty of what the HE in FE experience would be like created anxiety as *"given my last experience (the student having previously been a university student at a traditional HEI) didn't work out, I was a bit apprehensive to start with but I felt quite good."* (Participant 3, 2023) Those who did have a perception of what they expected often were more focused on the negatives in comparison to the traditional HE experience. For example, Participant 1 suggested *"So it (CCN) was sort of the only place still taking applicants...I was a little late to the party..."* (Participant 1, 2023). Within the focus groups, this idea of HE in FE being a second choice was prevalent with one student within the Animal Focus Group stating *"I never wanted to go to uni ...and then about two weeks before my exam, I was like, I wanna go to uni now"* with CCN being one of the last places with available spaces for their grade range (Animal Focus group, 2023). Likewise, the Sports Focus group suggested that they were limited by

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their previous choice of qualifications that did not fit the standards of other university including having 'life skills' maths instead of a GCSE Level 4 (Sports Focus Groups, 2023). These quotes indicate a wider pattern within the groups of their being a sense that CCN was a 'realistic' option that allowed lower performing level 3 students to access tertiary level education.

Significantly, the idea of localness was also essential. Some participants were internal progressors and therefore it was a logical step for them. In particular, participant 2 had completed multiple level 2 and 3 qualifications within CCN. Within the Animal Focus group, a participant said *"I had no idea that something like this was available so close so when I found out I literally immediately applied for it"* (Animal Focus group, 2023).

The easy access (being on a main A road that circled the city) was also a significant factor for the Sports Focus Group, creating an ease factor that helped to justify their choice (Sports Focus group, 2023). Furthermore, participants across all four courses suggested that the two set days of teaching time was an influential reason for why they chose to join the course. Significantly, a higher proportion of the participants had other job experiences or commitments (including childcare) that they felt they would have been less able to complete outside. An Animal Focus group participant suggested that their perception of a traditional university experience was *"you leave uni with a degree but nothing else. Whereas when you're here (CCN), you have all the opportunity"* (Animal Focus Group, 2023). Students felt that they were not only limited in their ability to apply for a more traditional HEI because of financial concerns if they had to leave their job, but also felt that their experience would have been better because they could get 'life experience' through working and volunteering (ibid.). The specialisations of these degrees compared to other significant HE providers (including the University of East Anglia and the Norwich University of the Arts) meant that

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students felt that often CCN was the only place that offered them the opportunity to study within their chosen area including Criminology, Animal Sciences and Policing. Even for the Sport Focus Group, they felt that other institutions' provision was not offering the same level of specificity in the areas of study compared to the larger local universities (Sports Focus group, 2023). Combined with the accessibility questions surrounding grades, this reinforced the perception that CCN was the only viable option to these students building into largely one of two narratives.

The first was the perception that CCN offered the best available option for the students because of the subject specialisation and the non-traditional nature of the experience. The second was the perception that it was the only option, due to issues surrounding locality and grade barriers. These two narratives within the focus groups and interviews suggest that students therefore have varying expectations that were tied to the rationales used to decide to join a HE in FE college. For those students who believed that City College Norwich was the best option for them, they often focused on the positive aspects of why they wanted to join e.g. the smaller class sizes, opportunities for work experiences, subject specialisation and the wider college environment. However, for those students who felt the course was a 'realistic' or last option they were often less concerned about the positive expectations and implied that they had more ambivalence to the experience they would be receiving. Often students felt that the idea of student hood was only part of their identity and that they could *"just go home and can do whatever you want there"* (Animal Focus group, 2023). As such, they perceived the experience before the course started as something they could 'cope' with to get the opportunities offered by a HE courses. As such, they often had low expectations of the courses they were signing up to even when they were applying for their course. On the other hand, these students sometimes expressed ideas that they wished the course was

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“more like uni... that’s probably a disappointing thing” (Sports Focus Group, 2023). By feeling separated from their traditional university experience that was outside of their opportunities, they felt they were missing out on what they expected a degree to be.

To what extent do the students’ experiences align with their expectations at the start of the course?

Significantly, the students felt that there was a variety of expectations of the course that were both positive and negative. Some of these had been exceeded whilst some had not. As Participant 2 said *“it blew some expectations out and put some new ones in.”* Significantly, there were 3 main expectations. Firstly, participants felt they were receiving a far greater amount of support than they believed they would have in a traditional HEI. This perception that at university level you would be what a participant in the Sports Focus Group called “Just a number” ran counter to the actual experience of the students. Participants suggested that this came both within the class time and in non-classroom support. This included both in 1-2-1 support academically (e.g. finding resources and with drafting) and pastorally. In particular, Participant 4, a SEND student, suggested that having a credited module for academic skills helped her motivate herself to develop key skills and to help develop time management. The Animal Focus Group also indicated having a tutorial supervisor, a non-course team member who focused on pastoral support, was a key benefit (Animal Focus group, 2023.) This support was directly attributed to the small course sizes within CCN which the participants believed allowed the lecturers the time and incentive structure to support them.

Another significant expectation of the students was that there would be a significant step up in difficulty. On the contrary, one participant suggested that their previous Access to Higher Education: Criminal Justice and Policing Level 3 course was more difficult due to the compression of two years of learning within the previous year

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(Public Sector Focus Group, 2023). Another participant suggested that the expectations from their level 3 course, from both staff and students, was that degree-level education would be “*10 times higher*” than their previous experiences (Ibid.) Significantly, these students also indicated that this was not only due to the level of the content being below what they expected in terms of theory and practice but also due to “*a lot of support and help on research*” (Public Sector Focus Group, 2023). However, it did lead to concerns that the participants felt they were missing out compared to universities stating they felt “*we’re not getting all the correct resources and education we need for the actual course*” and “*How is it we are doing the same level course (as a traditional HEI program)?*” (Animal Focus Group, 2023). Participant 1 summarised this by saying “*I mean it's the same level of degree, but it doesn't sound as high level*” (Participant 1, 2023). This reflects the argument with the academic literature that HE in FE provision often becomes more hybrid and does not build the independent learning skills that other providers may do. However, the students also engaged with the idea that they had more time within class and more weeks of teaching that allowed them to develop key knowledge using methods not available to their HEI counterparts. The students often were in favour of this arrangement however it reinforced the earlier narrative held by some students that this was a ‘second class’ provision.

Finally, the students often expected a different experience both in terms of who was in the classroom and what they would be doing. For example, a mature learner within the focus group stated “*I expected older people... I thought I'd be quite intimidated by people that were a lot younger than me*” (Public Sector Focus Group, 2023). This also manifested itself on the other end of the scale, where the students felt they were not receiving the youthful experience offered by other universities. This included ideas of a

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“freshers” week and “not enough drinking” (Sports Focus Group, 2023). This difference of expectations reflected the different perceptions of what the CCN experience was as something different to a traditional HEI (University-like) or lesser version of the traditional HEI (University-lite). When discussing these differences of perception, it often reflected that students felt they were unable to access opportunities that were available to traditional universities even whilst they were outlining the benefits they felt being at a smaller institution. This ‘best of both worlds’ approach could be seen in comments surrounding both options of modules, placements, trips and other key areas where expectations were not being met. For example, Participant 5 suggested that they wanted access to the wider campus of the academic partner, the University of East Anglia, to allow them to receive the benefits associated with degree level study. They said that this was part of City College’s “*big sell*” where the students would be able to access the opportunities at UEA, including sports clubs, whilst still receiving the non-traditional experience (Participant 5, 2023). The failure to provide these opportunities created negative satisfaction with the course and therefore led to students perceiving the quality of the provision as less. This is not to say that the students felt they were not receiving course enhancing opportunities. For example, Participant 5 said their tutors “*had gone over and beyond to enrich their course*”. This included a variety of guest lecturers and trips. Likewise, the ability to access the Animal Management Centre was highlighted by participant 4 as being a significant perk of the CCN experience as they were able to gain hands on experiences that would be impossible with larger cohorts (Participant 4, 2023). As such, those students who wanted a University-like experience were more likely to feel their expectations were met compared to those who believed that CCN was offering a University-lite option.

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How can the gap (or lack of it) be addressed for future improvement of the students' experience?

The most significant improvement that students expressed was the need for the creation a significantly different identity of the HE provision from that of the FE. This had been a concern with some students before they even began the course. For example, a participant from the Animal focus group stated *"Seeing Norwich City College students roaming around Norwich, I was well, you know, I'm trying to eat my McDonald's in peace and they're all playing their music and they're throwing stuff"* (Animal Focus Group, 2023). This perception of the 'core' of the institution being FE students had ramifications for their perception of not only what their experience would be like but also how their degree would be perceived. As one participant said *"And don't really have a reputation because nobody knows that we do higher education courses"* (Ibid.). The participants also pointed to the fact that staff members involved in recruitment often had highlighted that though those progressing internally would have a sense of comfort being in the same place, the way they would be treated would be more 'Adult'. For example, one student stated *"Because I was at Easton (part of CCN) last year, they made it out, we would be treated differently, but certain members of staff don't see it that way."* (Public Sector Focus Group, 2023). This was a key point as it meant students thought there would be a significant point of difference between the two.

The students often felt that they were not necessarily treated differently. A key example that came across all three of the focus groups was the behavioural seminar undertaken earlier in the year. In response to some issues on campus, all students (both FE and HE) were invited to a mandatory session within the class time. As one of the sports participants suggested they felt *"none of it related to us."* (Sports Focus Group, 2023). For example, one of the key points was that this was the last years of free education and students should be ensuring they were treating it seriously which created annoyance

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within the Animal focus group who felt the HE students were not only paying for their education but were being associated with issues they had no part with. Beyond this, the sharing of spaces created a sense of a lack of distinction between the two groups of students. For example, Participant 4 suggested that they would have preferred a separate smoking area because *“because you get like kids come over and they're obviously like really loud.”* (Participant 4, 2023). Even when there were HE only spaces, students felt they were being ‘invaded’ by FE students who created disruption (Public Sector Focus Group, 2023). Significantly, there was also a suggestion that it was not only that students felt that they either did not have their own spaces, but also that shared spaces were not suitable for them. This included the library, which the animal focus group suggested felt more like a school library and did not have the range of resources that they would have expected from a degree provider (Animal Focus Group, 2023). Though the students had access to the library of the University of East Anglia through CCN’s academic partnership, they felt that this was separated from them and they were less able to access it both because of psychological and physical barriers. As such, the lack of separation between HE and FE and the unsuitability of the shared spaces for HE students were a significant area where the participants felt their expectations were not being met.

Discussion

Categorising student by expectations

Significantly, the results section indicates that it is important to think about students of HE in FE institutions across two parameters. The first is whether the students expect the experience to be ‘University-like’ or ‘University-lite’. The second parameter is based on

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whether students feel their expectations are being met. The meeting of expectations is often essential to the satisfaction of students (Smith and Wertlieb, 2005). Figure 1 indicates the different level of satisfaction that students are more likely to feel dependent on their position on these two parameters.

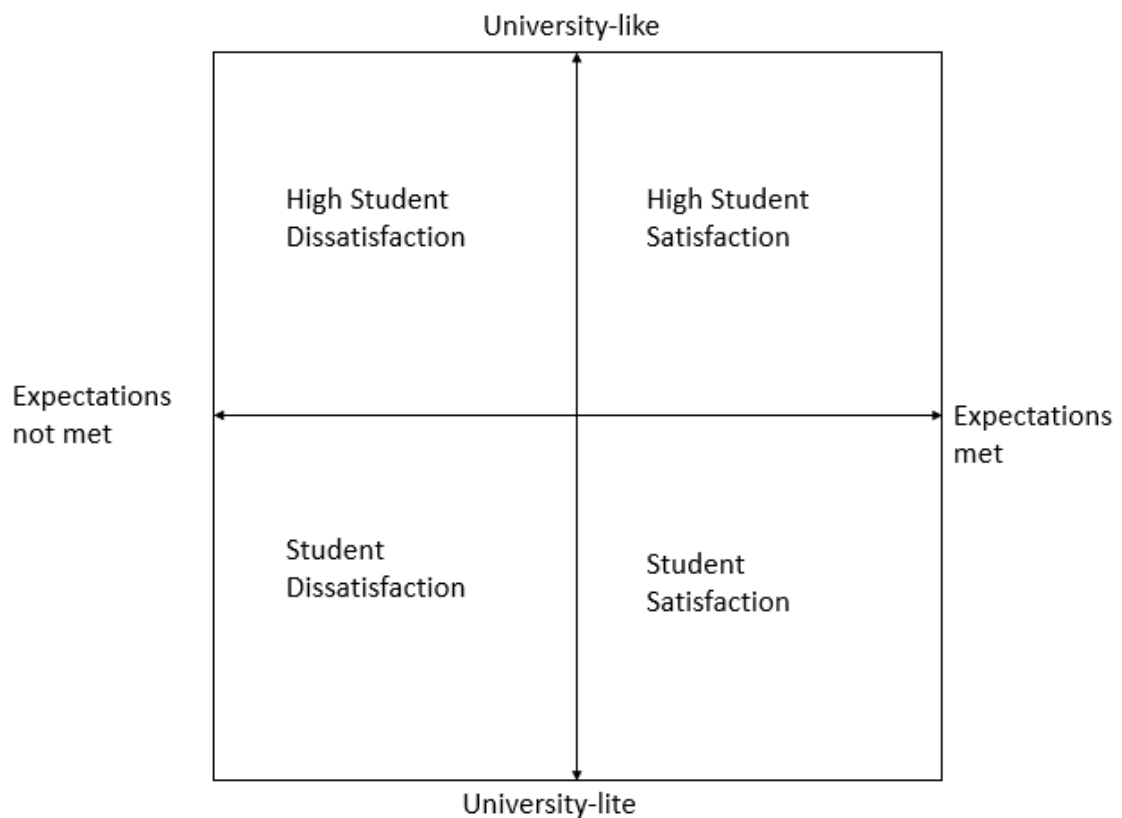


Figure 2: 'University-Like' and 'University-Lite' compared with expectations being met.

The 'University-like' students can be defined by the idea that HE in FE institutions provide a service to degree students that is similar in aim but significantly distinctive to the traditional HEI (HEFCE, 2003). Significantly, this involves a far greater reliance on traditional FE pedagogical styling, including less independent study and more supported learning (Edward *et al*, 2007). Students who fall into this category are more likely to be wanting a different experience from a traditional HEI especially around areas such as social environment, identity and organisational principles. These students therefore often have a positive vision of why they would like to go to an HE in FE provider,

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including those who may have been to traditional HEI's before. Significantly, this may include students who are from non-traditional university backgrounds including mature students and those with SEND requirements (Rapley, 2012). Students within this group were therefore more likely to have their expectations met when they were receiving a course that they perceived as more catered to their needs and more bespoke than a traditional HEI. Importantly, these students are more likely to be either highly satisfied or dissatisfied with their provision due to the higher expectations placed on the course.

The other category of students who are likely to attend a HE in FE provider is one who is looking for a 'University-lite' provision (Creasy, 2013). A student who is looking for a 'University-lite' provision is often expecting a similar experience to a traditional HEI though they often expect this to be of a lesser quality. This can be reflected in the lower tuition fees, access to the traditional amenities of a university (such as accommodations, student union, clubs and societies) and the perceived lower prestige of the teaching staff. Significantly, students who fit into this grouping often face barriers to accessing traditional HEI (Parry *et al*, 2012; Stolen, 2016; Crisp *et al*, 2009). These include students who may not fit the entry requirements for traditional HEI's, students who had significant work or childcare commitments or students who had the perception that the course they wanted were only available at a college. These students often have a negative perception of what they are expecting to receive within the HE in FE environment, building into a narrative that they were expecting a second-class experience. This correlates with the 'poor relations' view expressed by Eland (2008) who suggests that there is a significant gap in the perception of quality, parity and experience (Rapley 2012). These students often gave non-committal answers within the focus group surrounding what they were expecting. For example, participant 4 indicated "*like the college, that's not the best reputation*" (Participant 4, 2023). As such, these

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students' expectations often were minimal or that they expected a similar experience to a traditional HEI. These students are also more likely to compare their experience to this idealised perception on the provision of a traditional HEI. The results suggest that due to the more negative expectations, when these are met the student is less likely to be highly satisfied due to the perception that they would be receiving a better experience at a traditional HEI. On the other hand, the failure to meet these expectations is less likely to create a high dissatisfaction as students already perceive their experience as being 'lesser'.

Better meeting student expectations.

HE service quality is pivotal to a country's development, this is because HEIs prepare the next generation of managers in a variety of private and public sectors, this will include resources for health, care and education (Abili *et al*, 2011). Student satisfaction is often credited as the most important indicator of service quality in HEIs, and it helps HEIs gain an advantage over their competitors (Santos *et al*, 2020). The competitive nature of the HE global marketplace has led to students wanting to get the best quality education for a given level of tuition fee paid, leading to students being seen as customers. Students are routinely satisfied with the service provided by an HEI when they 'get what they paid for', that being a quality education, leading to a good qualification that is recognised in their industry of choice (Mark, 2013). A customer is satisfied when the quality of the product/service they received meets or exceeds their expectations (Mark, 2013). Perceived performance in comparison to the expectations can lead to a feeling of pleasure or disappointment for a student (Weerasinghe and Fernando, 2017). The development of student expectations of an HEI is multifactorial, student demographics, the HEI's marketing strategy and the type of experience the student wanted to engage with all feed into the perceived level of quality they are

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expecting the HEI to provide (Yooyen *et al*, 2011). The student's satisfaction is then a short-term attitude developed from their personal evaluation of the educational experience they are provided, the service given to them, and the facilities available at the HEI (Weerasinghe and Fernando, 2017). The question is what are the students expecting from the HE in FE experience?

A key theme found of the HE in FE students within this research is that they received more academic and pastoral support than they were expecting, this led to greater satisfaction with service quality in relation to working relationships with staff and the education provided. This is consistent with the research conducted by Greenbank (2007) who found that HE in FECs were able to provide a greater level of support than a traditional HEI due to smaller class sizes and greater availability of staff. Hodkinson *et al* (2007) also found that HE lecturers in FECs were more able to provide a supportive relationship with their students, and the students cited this as a primary reason for success and therefore satisfaction with the course. For students looking for a 'University-like' experience, this is a significant benefit that is going to increase the sense of student satisfaction. This is because the students felt they received higher amounts of both academic and pastoral support than a traditional HEI would have provided. By facilitating this in a more bespoke way, students' expectations were often met or even exceeded, creating a greater sense of quality within their provision.

Another key theme was that students felt the course content in their first year of study wasn't as difficult as they were expecting, often citing that this was due to the increased level of support that they were receiving (Animal Focus Group, 2023; Public Sector Focus Groups, 2023). They also found that this was different from their peers that were studying at traditional HEIs. This correlates with the findings of Ranzetta (2007) and Leahy (2012) where FECs tend to employ qualified and experienced teachers who could

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provide high levels of student support. This is also consistent with the findings of Feather (2011) that HE teaching has become more 'FE-like' in FECs due to the hybrid culture found at these institutions and the fact that the lecturers often teach across many levels of study. This has both positive and negative connotations for students based on their varying initial expectations of the HE in FE experience. For the 'University-like' students, this was a positive aspect of their course as they identified that they were getting more support and in class time to achieve their assessments leading to the feeling that the experience was 'easier' or not as difficult as a traditional university. This was ultimately in line with their initial expectations of the course, in that it wasn't going to be like a traditional university. It could be perceived that they were therefore getting more value from the lecturing staff for their money, leading to increased satisfaction with service quality. For the 'University-lite' students, this was perceived in a negative way so far as they felt that because they were getting more support, it felt like the course was being made easier and this led them to believe that they were not receiving an equivalent experience to their university counterparts. The 'University-lite' students felt they were missing out on opportunities to develop key skills, due to the perception that the course was being made easier them, feeding into the narrative that the HE in FE experience is somehow lesser than the traditional HEI. Creasy (2013) found that the adoption of FE teaching styles in HE in FE provision led to a decreased ability to create an HE experience for those students who wanted a feeling of 'HEness' from the FEC they were studying at. It is also consistent with their findings that HE in FE lecturers have a different perception of teaching quality, and therefore use a more diverse range of teaching styles and a greater level of student support, than their HEI colleagues. Conversely, an interesting comparison can be drawn to the findings of Crisp *et al* (2009) who found that the university students they interviewed were expecting a greater level

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of staff support and availability than they received and a greater level of academic support with assessments and draft reading of work.

The expectations of the extracurricular experience were another key theme raised in the findings of this research. Experiences that were used in marketing the course were either over exaggerated and not provided or not emphasised enough to give students insight into what was to be expected from their learning experience. Students who wanted a ‘University-lite’ experience were disappointed by the lack of social opportunities and facilities that are offered in a traditional University experience, as well as wanting the student study group to be more diverse and larger. However, this was on par with the ‘University-like’ students' expectations, as they were not expecting the facilities to be in line with a traditional university. Dissatisfaction is caused when something that was used in marketing the course, and was a “*big sell*”, was then not accessible to the student (Participant 5, 2023). Often the way a course is marketed paints a picture of what the academic experience will be like for the student. This then feeds into their expectations of the course and will ultimately be one of the deciding factors when choosing to study at a particular establishment. Due to the marketisation of HEIs, HE providers often aggressively market and promote themselves, this is so that they remain competitive and can boost student recruitment (Yooyen *et al*, 2011). HEIs need to be mindful of how they orient themselves in the HE market and how this aligns with the actual experience they can offer. This is important as they need to manage the expectations that the students have of their provision, whilst still maintaining a competitive advantage. Traditionally marketers are concerned with bringing more students, and therefore income, into the establishment, whilst not being responsible for the relationship the student has with the establishment. Therefore, the focus of marketing needs to be on matching promises made about the provision to the reality of

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the student expectation generated. An inability to manage the brand effectively in an HEI can lead to a loss of credibility, reputation and authenticity by the prospective student population (Davies, 2002). Similarly, unique selling points such as smaller class sizes need to be emphasised as part of the marketing strategy, along with elements of the course that exceed the student expectations such as access to trips, guest speakers, development of practical skills, experiential learning opportunities and unique facilities. This is consistent with the findings of Money *et al* (2017) who inferred that student satisfaction can be managed by lessening the gap between the expectations of the HEI and the experience that the students receive when they enrol. They outlined that this could be achieved through marketing and events management, to give a clear picture to prospective students exactly what tertiary study would be like at that establishment and then delivering upon those promises.

Higher education identity within Further Education

Having discussed the importance of meeting expectations of students, one of the central themes from the interviews, focus groups and literature review was the need to ensure that a Higher Education identity is present within a HE in FE provider. This has been a constant refrain since the 2006 Higher Education Academy report which suggested that students felt there was a 'less grown up' atmosphere within a FEC. This identity can manifest itself in numerous ways (Feather, 2010; Turner *et al*, 2009; Lei and Simmons, 2012). For example, one of these could include a branding that is different from the FE. This was an idea that was particularly appealing to the Animal Focus group, who suggested the name would be beneficial for creating a mental space where the experience was significantly different from the FE provision (Animal Focus Group, 2023). This would help resolve some of the fears of both the experience (through the

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perception they would be highly connected to the FE student body) and the reputation (that they would be associated with the FE students rather than a degree level experience). Significantly, the identity would therefore have to be both internal and external within the organisation (Kiriakidou and Millward, 2000). Internally, the organisation would have to be viewed as part of the institution to receive the benefits of being within a FE college in terms of internal progression, access to resources and student support. However, there would have to be significant enough distance from the FE students to allow students to be treated more as 'adults' and to allow space for different organisational behaviours. Externally, the separate identity would allow the students to feel they were not associated with the FE provision and allow them to perceive their degrees as having a higher credibility with external employers. This would benefit both University-lite students who would be expecting the course to be taught and supported in a way different from a traditional HEI whilst allowing University-like students to feel they are getting a closer experience to the one they feel they are missing out from.

Another way of increasing this distinction would be the creation of HE only spaces. Space has been strongly linked to the creation of identity within the HE sector (Temple and Fillippakou, 2007). It has often been associated with higher feelings of belonging, satisfaction and quality (ibid.). Throughout the focus groups and interviews the feeling that students did not have a separate space that they often accessed (having a school of higher education building that is a significant distance away and is perceived as separate from their day-to-day experience) created a sense of non-inclusion within the college. The participants often expressed that their needs were often secondary to the needs of the FE students outside of the classroom, with their needs and experiences being ignored. This varied from the way disciplinary issues were handled to the lack of

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separate facilities (e.g. smoking areas and bathrooms). Even within perceived HE spaces, participants often felt these were intruded on by FE students. The creation of the clear spaces for HE students is essential to for the 'University-lite' students to feel they are closer to a traditional HEI experience. On the other hand, for 'University-like' students by creating an HE space it would allow for them to feel they were getting a more responsive and service that better suited their needs.

Finally, the use of academic partners in a more effective manner would help increase the likelihood that students would feel their expectations are being met. As Gray (2016) argues, the linkage between academic partners is often based on the individual relationships between the HE lecturing team and their networks at the partner institution. This approach often highlights the distinct boundaries between the 'core' of the traditional HEI and the HE in FE 'periphery'. Though students often have some access to these resources, there are often unclear and blurred limits to these. This often creates bureaucratic boundaries to the extent that some students interviewed had not activated their provided associate member library cards (Animal Focus group, 2023). This approach often means that students miss out on some of the wider experiences that the partnership agreement is aiming to compensate for including sports and societies, wider political engagement, access to resources and facilities etc. By strengthening and institutionalising these connections with the academic partners, there is a greater opportunity for those students expecting an 'University-lite' experience to access some of the wider benefits that they associate with HE. This will allow them to feel their experience (especially the social and sporting side) is closer to the one provided by traditional HEI's. For 'University-lite' students, this would also give them an opportunity to opt-in to the aspects of traditional HEI provision that they may be in

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favour of whilst avoiding the commitments and lifestyle pressures that meant they saw the appeal of a HE in FE approach.

Conclusion

With the increase of HE in FE provision it is important to identify how effective non-traditional HEIs are at providing quality education. This research project has argued that to increase student satisfaction, it is essential to identify and meet/exceed the expectations of students studying HE within a FEC. The results indicate that instead of viewing students in a monolithic manner, it is important to instead view them as part of two groups of “University-like” and “University-lite”. The University-like students are more likely to have a more positive set of expectations of HE in FE provision whilst University-lite students are more likely to perceive the provision as ‘lesser’ compared to that provided by a HEI. As such, these students are likely to have varying satisfaction levels dependent on whether the expectations have been met, exceeded or unfulfilled, with ‘University-like’ students more likely to be highly satisfied/dissatisfied. Significantly, this report suggests that it is important to ensure that marketing is more realistic whilst still selling the highly important unique selling points that a HE in FE provision can provide to ensure that expectations remain reasonable. This includes emphasising higher student support, more flexible provision and better ability to meet SEND requirements. Furthermore, this report has argued that it is essential to ensure students receive an experience that has more elements of ‘HEness’. There were three recommendations to facilitate this. Firstly, there should be a distinct internal and external HE identity which allows a psychological separation from the FE student populations. Secondly, there should be an emphasis on the creation of both physical and social HE protected spaces to allow students to feel differentiated. Finally,

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there should be a greater institutionalisation of the academic partnership provision that would allow HE in FE students to use existing networks and resources in a more effective manner. Overall, this research project has found that the provision of HE in FE was largely perceived by students as meeting their expectations in a positive manner, though through these recommendations these providers could greatly increase student satisfaction and therefore both increase student retention and recruitment.

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