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Is there such a thing as 'comparableness'? The challenges facing the EEs of higher-education courses delivered within further-education institutions

[250-word overview]

This chapter explores the numerous considerations that an external examiner (EE) of an undergraduate degree within a further-education (FE) college must be mindful. There may be the perception that one's academic experience of lecturing within a university equips us with the knowledge to collaborate with colleagues within an FE institution. However, this is a valid point only to a certain point.

There is a spectrum of contrasts between the higher education (HE) and FE environments, that are reflected within the comparisons that this chapter highlights between the teaching-and-learning experiences. If we think back to the original purpose of an EE (where Oxford scholars were invited by Durham University to provide external guidance in the 19th century), we can appreciate the key task of an EE and its aim: to assess the comparability of student achievement. The landscape of HE has changed considerably since then, and now undulates with numerous opportunities for learners to gain a HE qualification.

It is this difficulty in assessing comparability that an EE of a HE course within an FE environment must be willing to acknowledge. The fact that the student-and-learning experience varies wildly in HE and FE muddies the waters for the EE: how can comparableness be assessed?

The chapter's lead author is Sarah Cooper, an academic who has taught at HE institutions since 2007, and has fulfilled the EE role on three courses - one of which was a HE course within an FE environment. The co-author is Sara Pearman, a lecturer on such a provision. As such, the subject of comparableness of HE degrees within an FE environment is explored from two different perspectives: that of internal and external.

1.0 Introduction

Picture an undergraduate student on a sociology degree at an 'elite university' (Lucas, 2006, p35). Our implicit bias may shape that picture into one that is comprised of an individual who has excelled at A levels and is the product of a middle-class background. Now envision that student's teaching-and-learning experience: engaged; eager to learn, supported by research-active teaching staff . League tables provide a quantitative overview of this particular andragogical experience, with the student:staff ratio of 11.2, strong career progression and an average entry tariff of 224 points (The Guardian, 2020). Those institutions ranked within the lower 10 of the table demand a higher student:staff ratio, with less robust career progression and a lower average entry tariff (at the time of writing, none of the institutions in this lower-10 bracket required entry points above 127).

Clearly, there are variations within the student-and-academic experience related to higher education (HE). And in amongst this, the external examiner (EE) is expected to bring consistency in a role created to provide external guidance - but a role of which the definition has not diversified since the 1800s (Jackson, 2000) - to the numerous HE provisions within varying environments as ranked within this arguably overly statistical league-table system.

Already, you may feel discombobulated. 'Varying environments' within a 'league-table system' from 2020 and a consistent approach that was first established in the 19th century, wherein Oxford scholars were invited to the University of Durham in an external consultancy role (Jackson, 2000).. ? And that's even before you've experienced the role of external examiner. As an academic, you will undoubtedly have collaborated (and it *is* a collaboration) with an EE in some capacity, even before you have the privilege of assuming the role of EE yourself. The collaborative nature of this role is the nugget of the relationship: being afforded the opportunity to reflect on practice and be inspired outside of your own HE 'bubble' (this, of course, is applicable to both the EE and the institution team).

The 'variation of environments', however, becomes all the more acute when it comes to being an EE of a degree that is delivered in a further-education (FE) college. If we refer back to the 1800s, and the Durham-and-Oxford collaboration (Jackson, 2000), then we might assume that the experience of both learners and lecturers in that environment was comparable. In the 2000s, however, there is the argument that this is not the case. And it is this point that we propose to explore within this chapter.

This chapter has been co-written by two people: Sarah Cooper and Sara Pearman. Cooper was the external examiner for an undergraduate course that Pearman delivered in an FE college. Cooper has also fulfilled the role of EE on two additional courses at HE institutions, and has conducted primary research in terms of consulting colleagues who have worked as an EE on a HE degree delivered in an FE environment and/or have taught within this scenario. This is, therefore, an informed overview as to the challenges facing those delivering HE degrees within an FE environment, and those challenges facing the EE who assumes that role

- and may previously have only had experience of delivering and/or external examining HE courses within a HE environment.

The first section of this chapter will be from the perspective of Pearman, as a lecturer on a HE course within an FE institution. It is from the lecturer's perspective that we can ascertain the challenges that face the teaching staff, and that therein inform the contribution of the EE. The second section of this chapter will be from the perspective of Cooper, as an EE attempting to contribute to the team's provision, but who was unaware of the difficult terrain that faces these teams in comparison to colleagues delivering HE courses within HE institutions.

1.1 The challenges facing FE lecturers when required to deliver a HE provision

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the challenges facing the external examiner when fulfilling the role on a degree course delivered within the environment of an FE institution. To be able to enhance our understanding of the contrasts between the HE and FE environments, it is important to deepen our awareness of the practices, resourcing and responsibilities that face those lecturers working to navigate this environment. As such, an EE – to be fully effective in the role – must undertake the added responsibility of gaining an insight into the differences and similarities facing colleagues within this environment, and to not simply apply their own experiences to that of the colleagues on the provision they are EE for. With this in mind, we aim to strip back the 'mystique' (as one participant in our primary research referred to it) of the FE environment by providing an overview of the key challenges facing lecturers within FE.

The landscape for FE lecturers delivering HE in an FE setting is challenging and can be fraught with highs and lows. For a vast majority of lecturers, attempting to find balance and

understanding is essential, yet daunting. Most lecturers who deliver HE in an FE setting teach across both sectors, have a full teaching commitment and receive little or no remission for this cross-sector delivery. lecturers delivering HE in an FE setting are likely to have more teaching hours than 'colleagues in HEIs' (BIS, 2012, p.11). This can create a stressful workload for those lecturers, especially for those who are new to delivering at HE level. For an EE working in this environment with no prior experience of FE staff delivering HE, it is likely that this will be the first conundrum they will witness the staff encounter. The EE will quickly ascertain the many variables that the staff are balancing, especially given their high teaching commitment.

An understanding is required by the EE that these staff are considering the requirements of both Ofsted in FE and the QAA in the HE setting. These lecturers have limited time for duties outside of their teaching commitment, which can mean that understanding the role of an EE can often become a working process. McGhee, P (2003, p. 123) provides insight here: 'The external examining system is designed to uphold standards across the sector, both in a sense of monitoring the consistency with which a university implements its own standards but more generally in the sense of maintaining (largely undefined) sector wide standards'.

There can be a misconception of what exactly the role of an EE is and perhaps the most supportive definition is that of a 'critical friend', an experienced HE practitioner, who brings with them a wealth of knowledge and a critical eye to the course they are externally examining. Therefore, for both the EE and the teaching team, this process can be a steep and valuable learning curve, in a pressured environment. It can often be the case that FE senior managers have a limited understanding of the requirements of the HE sector. As a result ,the support of an EE is a crucial element to a successful delivery of a HE programme in FE. The EE and/or the moderator (from the partner university) can often be the person that the teaching team will

reach out to for support, understanding and clarification. In order for a programme to be delivered successfully it is often the combination of a supportive EE and moderator that are the key – a key contrast, and one that an EE previously only experienced in working with courses within the HE sector must be mindful of.

Workload

Staff delivering in FE work in a high pressured, target-driven environment, where most are delivering the maximum amount of hours possible and across levels one to level six. It can be difficult to respond to the needs of the college, Ofsted, QAA, the partner university, moderators, EE and the students themselves. All staff will be involved in planning, delivery and assessment, second marking and internal verification processes. Staff can be tasked with the delivery of a session to level one students before moving on to level-six teaching and this mental adjustment can be difficult to adapt to. For this reason the role of the EE is exceptionally important: the impartiality of this role can offer a true reflection of how well the students work is being delivered and assessed. The EE often helps the college to benchmark their provision in comparison to other universities and/or other colleges delivering HE in an FE setting.

Scholarly activity and support in gaining higher level qualifications

There is an expectation that a lecturer at HE level will undertake research, scholarly activity and professional updating. However, Tummons, J et al (2013, p.84) suggests that 'FE colleges do not primarily position themselves as engaging in research'. In a university, staff are likely to be given remission (albeit to wildly varying degrees) to support these activities. Most universities will have a culture of research and understand the value of research. In most FE settings these values are very different, lecturers are likely to have the same teaching commitment, regardless of whether they teach FE or HE. The contact hours for a lecturer

delivering HE in FE environment is likely to be around 25 hours per week and includes cross-sector delivery. With the other duties that a lecturer will be responsible for, it is likely that they will not have much time for scholarly activities. It can be a challenge and frustrating for staff to breathe new life into the HE curriculum and their own skillbase.

Working across sectors

A key consideration for the FE teaching team is the negotiation of the collaborative landscape, in terms of teaching on and/or the coordination of degrees with different partnering institutions. This requires staff to understand and implement the rules and regulations of more than one university. An EE who is experienced in working with only one set of institutional regulations can appreciate the complexity of navigating this bureaucratic climate. It can be a challenge to separate Ofsted requirements from the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and FE awarding bodies from universities. The support of the EE is vital to guide the team through this landscape of ever changing rules and regulations.

When FE teams teaching HE first start to assess work at levels 4, 5 and 6, it can be difficult to initially 'find' the level of student work. This is a skill which is developed over time. The role of the EE is vital, to support with the appropriate awarding of grades, levelness and ensure quality of feedback for students regarding their work. The EE brings with them a wealth of knowledge, to support the team and build their confidence in making these decisions. It can be very reassuring for a team to know if they are assessing in line with universities and consider how comparable the students experience is, in terms of assessment. The moderator from the partner university, is also instrumental in the team's confidence to award the full range of marks available for assessment. FE teams can be hesitant to award higher grades, and may need

support to understand where grade boundaries lay. It may take several visits from the EE and moderator, before the team is completely confident in doing this. The quality assurance provided by the moderator and EE is essential to the development of any HE course in an FE environment. It is therefore likely when a college is recruiting an EE for their course, they may be more likely to recruit someone with experience of FE in HE, or a willingness to learn about the sector.

Widening participation

There are many complexities surrounding the students that study HE in FE. Avis and Orr (2016) argue that 'HE in FE tends to recruit students from the more disadvantaged sectors of the population,' (p14). Most FE colleges delivering HE are likely to have lower entry requirements than their university counterparts and lower tuition fees. As a result they are likely to attract students that would not ordinarily study at HE level and mature students. Consequently, it is also often the case that these students require more support to reach the required academic standards.

FE institutions – as with HE institutions - often operate an 'open-door' policy for students, where they can contact their lecturers and this ethos generally continues through to HE provisions. The main student intake for HE courses in FE will be those students who have progressed through the levels at the institution, and therefore the students are familiar with the staff delivering HE courses. There is often an expectation by the student and the college that the same level of support will be provided by the lecturers, despite the sector within which the student is studying. This can often be reflected in the student work produced for assessment, where grades can often cluster around the lower end of the scale. This may be a challenge for

a new EE: there is the responsibility to understand the parameters of this type of student and that they are unlikely to access the full range of marks available for assessment.

From a primary research perspective, the students who access HE in an FE setting are generally those that would not have applied to a university. Colleges are able to engage in widening-participation initiatives in a way that perhaps some universities are unable to do. BIS (2012, p12) suggests that HE students who study in FE are 'more likely to have come from areas of low participation in higher education'. FE colleges therefore have the scope and reach within local communities to offer learners who may not consider HE study the opportunity to do so. Tummons et al (2013) discusses the importance of the locale of the college in terms of recruitment: 'FE colleges are strongly located in local communities, often with close links to local industry and they offer local opportunities that are so important to their students. The college is part of the community, drawing students from the community and returning them to work in the same community,' (p32).

Most of these students would not move away to university: they live at home, benefit from lower tuition fees, require the support of small class sizes and thrive in this environment. They are likely to be from families where they are the first person to go to university and are from working-class backgrounds. Students who have progressed from a college into HE in an FE setting often feel supported by the environment. Tummons et al (2013) suggests that 'colleges have drawn significant numbers of students to HE programmes because they are perceived by many students to be a more familiar and less threatening environment than a university,' (p33). The EE therefore needs to be aware of this and understand the type of students engaging with the programme. Often when students marks are at the lower end of the scale, this may be a high level personal achievement for this type of student.

Resources

More recently, many FE colleges have invested in HE-only buildings, which supports students in the separation between the FE and the HE setting. This appears to be a positive move and one which is a more attractive offer to students. However, in terms of resources it is unlikely that these institutions can be comparable to their HE counterparts. Unless FE receives more government funding and HE tuition fees raised substantially, it would be hard to see how this situation might improve. However, resources are not particularly a primary concern for the students studying HE in an FE institution. From a primary perspective, students place higher value on locality, employment opportunities, support, familiar environment, class sizes and the support they would receive than positions within league tables. When you consider the wider picture of HE in FE, there is the acknowledgement that the target audience is not the same as traditional HEIs, and the environment supporting that target audience has additional challenges – all of which must be considered by the EE.

Overview: teaching team in FEI

The perception outside of the HE in FE environment is that perhaps students get a lesser experience, an experience that is less valuable and is of substandard quality. Dixon and Pilkington (2017) believe that college lecturers also come under scrutiny 'regardless of their qualifications or competency, have struggled to be accepted on equal footing with their HEI counterparts and remain poor relations,' (p2). However, in actuality the experience of HE in FE serves its students abundantly. Avis and Orr (2016) suggest positively that 'HE in FE courses can and do transform lives by opening up fields of knowledge that may explain and enhance experience,' (p14). HE in FE supports students to gain higher level qualifications, at

a very poignant moment in time, where the employment market is competitive and therefore these students now stand an equal chance of success.

1.2 The challenges facing the External Examiner

We have mentioned the fluidity in the interpretation of what an EE actually does, but Jackson (2000) highlights certain key points that have remained consistent:

'Ever since the first half of the nineteenth century when the University of Durham invited scholars from Oxford to help set and mark examinations, external examiners have been the primary means of cross-referencing standards or outcomes of learning between HE institutions to different subjects. Although the specific duties and functions of external examiners vary between institutions they essentially provide a department or programme team with an independent and objective perspective on the assessment process and outcome standards, by comparing what they see with what they have seen in other institutions. Thus external examiners act as a type of benchmarking agent for an unstructured, unsystematic and largely implicit type of benchmarking process,' (p31).

There are many significant points to this citation, which reflect that fact that as an EE there are many challenges to be faced, based upon the 'unsystematic' and 'unstructured' moderation process. In addition, the 'independent perspective' is also a point to consider. Independent from what? The QAA provides a central resource point for guidance with regards the establishment of consistent benchmarks throughout HE. There is a network of guidelines intended to assure the quality of HE in terms of assessment. The 'independent perspective' then, must be one that's aligned with the 'external' aspect of 'external examining'. From this angle, one interpretation could be that the external examiner is independent to the institution's processes, and that there is room for subjectivity with regards

assessments and moderation within the institution. For instance, a lecturer is aware of the progress and achievements of each individual student, whereas the EE has little-to-no such awareness. However, for an EE of a HE course in an FE environment to approach the moderation in a fair and robust way, some consideration to the processes that the FE lecturer is required to follow should be considered, in order for the individual course team's moderation process to be understood.

For instance, FE courses are subject to the bureaucratic attention of Ofsted, alongside mainstream state schools, independent schools (including those affiliated with the Steiner curriculum) and early-years environments. HE courses, however, are not (though these are subjected to other benchmarks, such as the National Student Survey). The pressures, guidance and challenges imposed upon FE colleges from Ofsted are remarkably similar to those imposed upon schools. FE colleges are subjected to the same categories relating to perceived quality as schools: ranging from 'inadequate' to 'outstanding'.

This is particularly challenging when it comes to external examining HE provision delivered within an FE environment. When an institution's main focus is on HE delivery, QAA benchmarks are aligned to. This is an endeavour that HE lecturers are expected to adhere to, in order that an opportunity for a student to engage with the HE experience is offered. But when a lecturer is required to move between the role of 'HE lecturer' and 'FE tutor' - often with barely minutes' adjustment - then the challenge is set for the external examiner not to be independent and base their guidance and observations on experience as a HE lecturer within a HE environment, but to be aware of the particular challenges that face these colleagues.

It is the inconsistency of external examining HE courses in FE institutions that was highlighted by the review of external examining, conducted in 2011. Key recommendations included 'the commitment to increased consistency of practice across universities and colleges and the commitment to increased transparency for students,' (Finch, 2011, p4). This brings in a new perspective: that of the student. As Jackson (2000) stated, the original purpose of external examining was to provide the 'programme team' with 'independent' observations on academic practices. But this review incorporates the significance of 'transparency' for students. This reiterates the shifting sands that EEs often find themselves: and when that EE has frequently been accustomed to the practices of HE (wherein Ofsted has no remit), then the reviewing of HE courses within FE institutions becomes an even more fluid practice.

And yet, the EE is deemed to be a significant cog in the setting and maintaining of standards, '...an integral and essential part of institutional quality assurance,' (QAA, 2018, p4). There is, potentially, conflict in respect of the establishment of comparable standards and the autonomy of each institution. 'Over 140 universities and colleges separately set and maintain their own standards, but at the same time there is a public expectation that qualifications awarded by one institution are broadly comparable with those awarded by all others. This tension is resolved in a number of ways, including – importantly – by the external examining system,' (Finch, 2011, p5). But how can comparative standards be assessed when FE institutions - most notably, the programme teams - are subject to differing benchmarks, broad perceptions, research demands, and resource disadvantages?

These challenges, in terms of the ones facing the teaching staff, are explored in the first part of this chapter. Primary research, however (based on remote discussions with participants of

an EE digital forum), shows that there are a number of challenges facing the EE that are consistent across experiences, regardless of institution. The comparability of standards is one that can be challenging to ascertain, when the experiences of educational environments (in terms of HE and FE institutions) is difficult to homogenise. There are a number of hurdles that challenge the programme team of a HE course in an FE environment, and these in turn potentially pose challenges to the EE from an equivalent discipline but from a HE environment. These are: a general, and comparatively minimal support to engage in research; a comparatively smaller pool of higher-achieving students from which to recruit; comparatively higher demands on student services; comparatively poorer perceptions of academic standards, and comparatively higher demands on college lecturers in terms of teaching allocation.

Comparative support in research

There is the general assumption (or the 'public expectation' that Finch (2011) points to) that individuals who lecture on an HE course are specialists in the discipline within which they are positioned. That 'assumption' is one that is often encountered on a primary level when speaking to the parents of students, colleagues from industry who do not teach at a HE level, and the students themselves. HE institutions differ wildly with regards the provision and support of research opportunities to teaching staff, which in itself is cause for discussion, though not within this particular context. When HE institutions are judged upon contributions to the research excellence framework (REF) in terms of their positioning within the league table, it is clear why colleagues are expected (albeit encouraged to various degrees) to engage with research. Indeed, the REF makes clear in guidance documents that the focus is on 'higher education institutions', rather than 'higher education lecturers' or 'researchers

affiliated with higher education', which can diminish the motivation of lecturers on HE courses within FE institutions to engage in the process.

Herein lies a problem for the EE of a HE course within an FE institution when aligned with the expectation to ensure that comparable and objective standards are met: how can the output of the students within an FE environment produce work of a comparable standard to students within an HE environment, when lecturers teaching within those environments are subject to different opportunities, incentives and workloads? One could argue that, in this situation, the outcomes of the students are entirely dependent on the initiatives of the lecturers. From a primary research perspective, it has been surprising to note the lack of research opportunities afforded to lecturers on a HE course within an FE institution.

On a number of occasions, participants of informal discussions I have held on the subject have said that research is to be conducted *in addition* to the teaching workload, and the teaching workload already brings the lecturer up to allocation. Considering the workload already weighing heavy on the shoulders of programme teams within this scenario, it is understandable why research quickly slips down the list of priorities. And yet, within HE institutions, if you're not proactive in research, then the requirements of your vocational criteria are considered unmet. As such, engaging with research duties is often integrated (again, with distinct variations) into the workload. It is a privilege for lecturers who are able to engage with such duties to then be able to feed back into their teaching, and facilitate innovative thinking within their students' learning experience. When the opportunities to engage with research is minimal or non-existent, then the teaching cannot be considered comparable - regardless of the student experience. As such, if a HE course is to be delivered, then the programme team involved within that student experience should be encouraged to

engage with research that enhances that experience, and differentiates the HE curriculum and expected outcome from that within FE.

During primary research for this chapter with EEs of HE courses within an FE institution as well as course teams within HE and FE environments, a consistent theme was highlighted with regards research: the support given to researchers varied considerably, with comparatively less support and opportunity afforded to researchers within the FE environment. This has ramifications with regards the student experience and the student 'output' (in terms of the standard of work produced). One participant in the primary research remarked that there was a managerial assumption that supporting FE staff teaching on a HE courses to engage in research activities would impact *negatively* on staff retention, in that staff would leave to as career opportunities were widened through research profiles and achievements. However, the participant highlighted that it was that very lack of support to research that impacts negatively on staff retention, and staff were leaving because they were unable to engage in the research duties that their colleagues on equivacable courses in HE institutions were not only engaging with but were actively encouraged to engage with.

This contradictory point can be best demonstrated by the REF 2021 document offering guidelines with regards application. While it states that it invites applications from HE institutions, and colleges providing HE courses, applicants keen to submit to the REF should have dedicated time to engage with research - indeed, there are expected to research, or teach and research. Eligible staff 'are defined as academic staff with a contract of employment of 0.2 FTE or greater, on the payroll of the submitting institution on the census date, whose primary employment function is to undertake either 'research only' or 'teaching and research'. Staff should have a substantive research connection with the submitting unit,'

(REF, 2019, p29). However, the common structure of FE is one that is influenced significantly by Ofsted, and as a result, few staff are able to have that 'substantive research connection.' As such, the challenge for the EE of a HE provision with an FE environment is to ensure the student work and experience is comparable to those of others in the discipline, but bearing in mind that there is a highly disproportionate emphasis on staff's research activities.

Comparative recruitment opportunities

One impactful factor that can determine the variables of student outcomes is the pool from which an institution can successfully recruit from. The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) remains the central point of processing applications to HE courses, and in 1998, it reported that an increasing number of applicants were choosing institutions that were geographically advantageous, being situated close to their 'home region of domicile': 'This [trend] is particularly true for mature applicants, applicants from ethnic minorities and partly skilled and unskilled social classes,' (Coleman and Viggars, 2000, p132).

Widening participation has been a key consideration of the UK education system, with a 2018 report from the Department for Education (DfE) using free school meals as a way in which to quantify progress (or lack thereof) in the national intention to equalise opportunity. The report found that 'An estimated 25.6% of pupils who were in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM) aged 15 in 2012/13 entered Higher Education by age 19 by 2016/17. This compares to 43.3% of non-FSM pupils', (DfE, 2018, p1). This is a marked increase from the progress of pupils receiving FSM in 2005/2006, of which only 14.2% progressed onto HE. However, there is also a marked increase in the progress of pupils not in receipt of FSM - from 33.5% in 2005/2006 to 43.3%. As such, while there has been an increase in the number

of pupils in receipt of FSM progressing to HE, *the gap between those pupils and their peers who are non-FSM pupils remains* (own emphasis).

The implications here means that, while the provision of HE courses in FE institutions has been a key factor in the widening-participation intent, the demographic of students recruited onto the course will vary. We have traditionally observed this, when we compare the recruitment practice of Russell Group (or 'red brick' or 'elite') universities (with comparatively higher requirements in terms of entry-point tariffs) and former polytechnics: there is the perception that one is more prestigious than the other. Similarly, the report found that pupils from independent schools were more likely to be recruited by the 'most selective' of HE institutions than those who had attended state schools (DfE, 2018).

It's been previously noted that EEs are required to moderate the comparability of student work, with Advance HE (formerly referred to as the Higher Education Academy) stating in a 2018 report on the 'fundamentals' of external examining that a key responsibility is the 'commenting on the comparability of student performance and standard of awards of the institution in respect to their experience of other higher education providers,' (Advance HE, 2018, p7). However, to refer to higher education providers in such a sweeping manner - as many reports often do - disregards the strata within that, including the red bricks, the former polytechnics and the FE colleges. What this would imply is that there is a general assumption as to what a higher education provider looks like (to parents, employers, and prospective students) based on primary or secondary experience, but which a consistent framework in reality *does not exist*, and it is a challenge for the external examiner of a HE course within an FE institution to reconcile the requirement to comparatively analyse a cohort's achievement against those of another (particularly those within the more 'selective' universities). The

calibre of students is inconsistent across HE institutions, and while the EE must be mindful of this when working with colleagues on a HE course in an FE environment, the challenge is set that the 'outputs' and achievements of those students within an FE environment are comparable with those in a HE environment.

1.3 Conclusion

In 2001, there was a governmental shift of focus onto the creation of a fertile environment to facilitate the flourishing of degree courses in FE institutions. 'The growth of higher education in FE colleges is now at the centre of government policy to expand undergraduate education at levels below the first degree and to incorporate this provision as rungs in a new vocational ladder spanning compulsory and post-compulsory education,' (LSDA, 2001, p1). The latter citation is from a report produced by the now defunct Learning and Skills Development Agency (2001) highlights issues that, nearly two decades later, are still prevalent. For instance, the report calls for 'strong forms of coordination… if a new framework for vocational progression' was to be realised (LSDA, 2001, p4). It highlights the lack of clarity (as acknowledged in the 1997 Dearing review of HE) about 'the primary purpose of higher education offered by or in association with colleges of further education,' (LSDA, 2001, p5). Nearly two decades later, the ambiguity relating to purpose and the variation in coordination in terms of the provision of HE within an FE environment remain not only prevalent but impactful on the student experience - which in turn, causes inconsistencies and challenges for the academic who has assumed the EE role on a HE provision within an FE college.

But the inconsistencies are not exclusive to the external examining of degree courses within this framework. If we refer back to the introduction of this chapter, we imagined the teaching-and-learning experience of a student at a Russell Group institution to that of a

student at a former polytechnic - a marked contrast, even if we make this conclusion based on the student:staff ratio as specified in league tables. The challenge for an EE of a HE provision within an FE institution is to advise and collaborate with their FE team not from what they know from experience (which is often within a HE environment) but from what the FE team are able to deliver. And from personal experience - as an EE for a college undergraduate degree, a university degree, and a postgraduate degree - the teaching-and-learning experience is absolutely variable with regards the institutional input relating but not limited to staff support and resourcing.

We've seen the perspectives of a lecturer and an external examiner with regards the delivery of a HE course within an FE institution and common themes can be identified in terms of the challenges posing both positions - whether it be a lecturer within FE, or the EE. The two subsections within this chapter view the challenges facing the EE through two contrasting lenses: that of the person looking in (the EE), and the person 'looking out' via the perspective of the EE looking in (the lecturer). There are consistent issues that persist from both internal and external perspectives which entwine to make the key challenge of: what is 'comparable' anyway? Not even the QAA's glossary (2018) provides a definition, despite the 'comparableness' of courses being the underpinning to the role of the EE.

We started the chapter imagining the teaching-and-learning experiences of students within an elite university. Having explored the teaching-and-learning experiences of students within an FE environment but studying a HE provision, we can gain an understanding of the contrasts between both situations. As such, it seems only pertinent to end this chapter by arguing that the experience of external examining for a course of an elite university is in contrast to that of external examining for a course within an FE institution - a challenge that must be recognised

in order for FE courses to fully optimise the opportunity of having the external guidance of an EE.

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