

Universities and FE colleges fear “Hunger Games” battle for students after pandemic

Universities and Further Education colleges will be drawn into more “turf wars” and fights to attract new students in the wake of the Coronavirus pandemic, education leaders have warned.

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The sectors’ concerns are revealed in a new Social Market Foundation report on the relationship between higher education (HE) and further education (FE), which predicts tension and conflict unless ministers do more to clarify the roles of the two sectors.

The SMF interviewed more than 20 FE principals and university vice-chancellors about the working relationships between their institutions.

The report uncovered significant worries that cooperation is being undermined by the increasing overlap in the courses offered by FE colleges and some universities.

Though the Government has suggested it wants to encourage competition, with Boris Johnson last year promising to make FE colleges “better able to compete with universities” [Note 1], the SMF suggested this objective could be counterproductive, souring relations between institutions and creating wasteful duplication of teaching.

The two sectors are being pushed towards an “educational version of the Hunger Games” according to one senior FE figure.

However, the research, which was supported by the Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL), a grant-making charity, also found that there are significant benefits to collaboration between universities and colleges. This includes sharing knowledge and resources, providing a wider range of complementary courses and creating pathways for disadvantaged students into higher education.

Ministers have said they want more students to do Level 4 and 5 qualifications – such as Higher National Certificates and Higher National Diplomas – that rank below a degree. While such courses are often run by FE colleges, more universities are starting to offer them, in order to attract students and funding.

Sector leaders interviewed by the SMF feared that post-pandemic financial pressures would drive some universities to step up their effort to woo students away from FE. Additional Government funding for technical qualifications after the pandemic will increase the financial incentives for “head-to-head pitched student recruitment battles”, the SMF said.

A projected rise in the number of 18 year olds in the UK could help relieve some competition for students in the coming years. However, reductions in international student numbers following the pandemic and Brexit could offset any demographic easing of competitive pressures.

HE and FE leaders fear those tensions are likely to grow, the think-tank report revealed.

The SMF said:

“A great deal of apparently inefficient competition, sowing mistrust that undermines cooperation, occurs because of a lack of clarity over the respective roles of universities and colleges. These turf wars take place particularly in the Level 4-5 space.

“With the Westminster Government intending to expand technical education located in the middle of this disputed territory, a number of those we spoke to were concerned that conflict would intensify.”

Dame Ruth Silver, President of the Further Education Trust for Leadership, said ministers should set out clear roles for the two sectors rather than encouraging them to fight for resources.

She said: *“HE and FE must be united, not pitted against one other, as per our usual habit. Their roles, as argued in this report, are complementary – their respective institutions should not be obliged to fight it out in some ideologically-fuelled educational version of the Hunger Games.”*

The SMF found that competition between HE and FE could be useful, but would require a new system to decide which institutions are best-equipped to provide different courses and qualifications. The report says:

“Ultimately, what is needed is a clearer demarcation of which institutions should do what. That does not mean an end to competition altogether, but rather a shift in the arena of competition – away from head-to-head pitched student recruitment battles, and towards a form of competition based around which institution can make an effective case to a coordinating authority that they are best placed to deliver each form of provision.”

Aveek Bhattacharya, Chief Economist at the SMF, and a co-author of the report, said:

“In theory, competition between universities and colleges is intended to drive up standards and increase student choice. In practice, though, differences in funding, scale and cultural cachet make it hard for them to compete on a level playing field.

“The actual effect of competition is to undermine effective collaboration, limiting options for students and make the system as a whole less effective at improving skills and increasing opportunity.”

Notes:

1. [Boris Johnson, September 2020](#): We will give FE colleges access to the main student finance system, so that they are better able to compete with universities.
2. The report Study Buddies? is published at 09:30 on Wednesday 17 March, at www.smf.co.uk/publications/study-buddies
3. The research was funded by the Further Education Trust for Leadership. The SMF retained full independence.

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Extracts:

The Government in England has signalled its intention to increase the number of students doing Level 4 and 5 technical courses – an area that sits in the 'messy middle' between universities and colleges – and this has already set off some jockeying for position between the two sectors.

Driven by a demographic decline in the number of 18 year olds entering education and the lifting of caps on student numbers in 2015, universities have increasingly moved into areas typically considered colleges' territory - Level 4 and 5 qualifications, particularly with the expansion of foundation years – even as the overall number of students taking Level 4 and 5 courses has fallen. Some universities have even started offering Level 3 (A-level equivalent) courses. At the same time, colleges have been squeezed by a decline in the level of funding for their core activities, with per student funding falling by 12% in real terms from 2010/11 to 2019/20.

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