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Special issue: *Colleges as anchor institutions in their local community: promoting inclusive economic, social and educational growth*

Research article

## Leading undergraduate provision in further education colleges: the experiences of BA Education programme leaders

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Submission date: 14 January 2022; Acceptance date: 14 December 2022; Publication date: 15 March 2023

### How to cite

Purves, R.M., Pulsford, M. and Morris, R. (2023) 'Leading undergraduate provision in further education colleges: the experiences of BA Education programme leaders'. *London Review of Education*, 21 (1), 9. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.21.1.09>.

### Peer review

This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-anonymous peer review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.21.1.09>.

### Open access

*London Review of Education* is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

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## Abstract

This article explores the experiences of those who lead undergraduate education-related programmes in further education (FE) colleges in England. Questionnaire and interview fieldwork with 14 further education-based programme leaders were supplemented by a comparison survey of equivalent professionals from higher education institutions (HEIs). Drawing on Hodgson and Spours's four-level lifelong learning ecology and Nardi and O'Day's keystone species concept, our analysis characterises the role of the undergraduate programme leader as distinctive and critical within the further education

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context. Extremely multifaceted and busy, this role is also poorly defined, often involving individuals relying on craft wisdom accrued within specific contexts. Three overall strands of responsibility emerged in participants' view of their role: the administrative and organisational demands of colleges and the validation/franchising of higher education partners; the provision to learners of appropriate support in their studies; and the recognition of and response to pastoral needs of students. Tensions were identified between these, with one strand tending to preoccupy programme leaders at any time, obscuring their view of other important role objectives. As such, we introduce the concept of sightlines to capture the importance of enabling programme leaders to see through and beyond their institutional context and engage outwards, rather than turn inwards. Practical recommendations include the provision of time and licence to study for advanced qualifications, to undertake research and to help nurture distinctive cultures of higher education learning.

**Keywords** college-based higher education; further education; programme leadership; lifelong learning ecology; keystone species; professional development; FE in HE

## Introduction

This article explores the experiences of those who lead education-related undergraduate degree-level provision delivered in further education (FE) colleges in England (BA Education Studies and similarly named programmes). Our study draws on the 'four levels of a lifelong learning ecology' outlined by Hodgson and Spours (2009: 15). This model has been used to inform other recent studies of undergraduate provision within further education (for example, Henderson, 2020; Keenan, 2020), and it provides a framework for our data analysis.

### The macro layer of undergraduate provision in further education: the case of education-related programmes

According to Hodgson and Spours (2009: 16), the macro layer of lifelong learning comprises 'national institutions and structures, approaches to policy-making and policy instruments'. The diverse range of post-compulsory, sub-degree and undergraduate education-related and allied teacher training programmes now delivered in FE colleges reflects a broad range of policy initiatives over several decades. This provision has origins in various national efforts in the 1990s and 2000s to encourage colleges to equip their workforces with teaching qualifications (Lucas, 2004; Brand, 2007). Additional introductory teaching qualifications were also in line with FE colleges' traditional remit to provide vocational education for the local economy (Unwin, 2008).

Developments in post-compulsory teacher education within further education took place alongside a major expansion of undergraduate provision in the sector following the 1997 Dearing report (Rapley, 2014). One subject area which grew considerably in the years following was education studies (Ward, 2008). Intended to be distinct from teacher 'training', education studies degrees emphasised academic and research-informed critiques of education policy and practice, rather than offering qualified teacher status (Furlong, 2013). Higher education–further education partnerships were a feature of education studies provision from an early point: by 2001, 13 FE colleges offered undergraduate courses in this area, together with 64 higher education institutions (HEIs) (QAA, 2001). These partnerships were strongly influenced by a further thrust of post-Dearing policy which sought to increase the numbers and diversity of individuals undertaking higher education – the so-called widening participation agenda (Thompson, 2019).

Widening participation was also a driver behind the Labour government's introduction of foundation degrees from 2001. These two-year, vocationally oriented Level 5 programmes were developed in subject areas regarded as being of particular benefit to local economies and workforces, and were particularly intended to appeal to 'non-traditional' students (Elliott, 2020: 3). (This article refers

to various 'levels' as defined by the Regulated Qualifications Framework [RQF]. This is 'the system of classification of vocational and educational qualifications that is used in England and Northern Ireland' [Heery and Noon, 2017]. A total of 11 levels are employed. Beyond three levels describing various basic skills qualifications, subsequent levels describe GCSE and equivalent [Levels 1 and 2], advanced level and equivalent [Level 3] bachelor's [Level 6], master's [Level 7] and doctoral qualifications [Level 8].) Again, further education providers worked in partnership with HEIs to deliver such programmes (Furlong, 2013). Foundation degrees could be 'topped up' to full Level 6 bachelor's degree status through an optional additional year of study. The popularity of this option, combined with the appeal of a familiar, local environment, and ongoing support meant that many FE colleges started offering this top-up year on site (Griffiths and Lloyd, 2009; Kendall and Mitchell, 2020).

The graduated, diverse provision which has evolved within this macro layer can be regarded as an example of the widening participation agenda in action. In some settings, there will be potential for learners to progress from introductory Level 3 vocational qualifications in teaching, education and training through to Level 6 honours degrees in education studies or allied academic disciplines – all within the same local institution, and often with the same group of staff (Tucker et al., 2020). Such a complex alignment of vocational and academic provision, however, highlights tensions between efforts to enhance and expand provision, while also contributing to economic development through workforce training (Elliott, 2020).

### **The exo layer of institutional relations**

The exo layer of lifelong learning comprises the 'local institutional relations in the context of a wider set of interactive demographic, community, local/regional administrative and labour market factors' (Hodgson and Spours, 2009: 15). As Henderson (2020) notes, further education institutions (FEIs) that offer higher education programmes often have close institutional relationships with their localities. Colleges often have long-established relationships with local employers, either formally, through partnerships, or informally, via the many learners who combine study with local employment (Parry et al., 2012). In education-related courses, for instance, students might be employed locally as teaching assistants (Morris, 2010), or undertake placements in schools or other organisations (Simon, 2017).

Further key institutional relationships emerge from the administrative, regulatory and delivery partnerships between FEIs and the HEIs with whom they work. Some FE colleges develop their own undergraduate provision, which is then 'validated' by an HEI with degree-awarding powers (DfE, 2017). Other FEIs deliver provision which is 'franchised' by a higher education partner. In this case, 'the franchising institution retains overall control of the programme's content, delivery, assessment and quality assurance arrangements' (DfE, 2017: 4). Only recently have a small number of colleges been granted undergraduate degree-awarding powers in their own right (Noble, 2022).

### **The meso layer of professional practice: undergraduate programme leaders as a 'keystone species' within further education**

The meso level describes the 'educational professionals who play a critical part in the learner's micro-ecology' (Hodgson and Spours, 2009: 15). Yet Hodgson and Spours (2009: 15) also note that learners' experiences are likely to be influenced by a range of linked factors, including 'health, housing, work or worklessness', which require support from, and interaction with, additional professionals. To this end, we join with Hodgson and Spours (2009) in employing Nardi and O'Day's (1999) concept of the keystone species to describe the education professionals who hold central, anchoring roles in local learning ecologies. Specifically, through our research with this group, we have come to regard undergraduate programme leaders as a particularly distinctive and critical keystone species within the further education context. A range of authors have identified high-quality, personalised student support, based on strong interpersonal staff–student relationships, as a major asset of undergraduate provision within further education (Elliott, 2020; Griffiths and Lloyd, 2009; Keenan, 2020). Moreover, as Dhillon and Bentley (2016) note, it is the programme leaders and their teams who, by virtue of being 'on the ground' in such further education contexts, are often best placed to guide students' emerging self-identities as higher education-level learners. Through close engagement with higher education partners, these professionals can 'support and nurture students' (Dhillon and Bentley, 2016: 147) to broaden perspectives and raise aspirations.

## The micro layer of the undergraduate learner within further education

The micro layer locates the learner ‘in their most immediate setting – their home, community and working environments, family networks and peer relations, and relationships with education professionals’ (Hodgson and Spours, 2009: 15). As noted by Keenan (2020), undergraduate courses offered in FE colleges are often reflective of the communities they serve, and cater for the considerable diversity of learners in those areas, including those from ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds. A desire to promote social justice through greater access and opportunities for non-traditional undergraduate learners offers a powerful motivation to many teaching in this sector (Avis and Orr, 2016). It is those charged with managing these courses who must respond to this diversity to maximise student experience, and to personalise learning in order to maximise academic success (Schofield and Dismore, 2010). Within the delicate micro layers that can evolve in such circumstances, different conceptualisations of leadership can emerge, ‘closer to the concept of “stewardship” used by environmentalists’ (Hodgson and Spours, 2009: 5). As such, efforts to remould undergraduate provision within further education in the image of universities may be misguided, with some of this distinctiveness being lost in the process (Husband and Jeffrey, 2016).

Adopting the ecosystem model and the concept of keystone species, we next describe the background to our recent research project involving further education-based programme leaders. Finally, we report findings from our project, and situate these alongside the literature, recognising the challenges and tensions faced by these leaders, and the opportunities that they identify for supporting their professional development and fulfilment.

## Project background: assessing the health, status and future of undergraduate degrees in education

The data discussed below are drawn from a recent research project funded by the British Education Studies Association (Pulsford et al., 2021), which explored how undergraduate education-related programmes are faring within contemporary UK higher education and further education contexts. The project aimed to contribute to the evolution and development of the field through understanding programme leaders’ views of their courses and the subject area more widely. In this article, we present findings from the study, particularly focusing on the perspectives and experiences of those working in FE colleges, and comparing them with those working in higher education.

The project featured two phases of data collection fieldwork. First, we conducted an online questionnaire with education-related undergraduate programme leaders; this was followed by a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The online questionnaire was available between February and September 2020. Participants were invited to provide contact details if they wished to be involved in the interviews. Interviews were conducted online between July and November 2020 with representative subsamples of participants. These covered themes relating to career background, appointment to the programme leader’s role, institutional context and conditions, student profile, links with initial teacher education, workload and current and future challenges.

We sought to invite all education studies-related programme leaders in FEIs and HEIs across the UK to participate in the questionnaire. Invitations were disseminated via British Education Studies Association (BESA) newsletters and our own extensive professional networks, and via social media and systematic searches of course websites. Ultimately, 70 programme leaders completed our online questionnaire, with the vast majority based in England (an additional 14 responses were so incomplete as to be unusable). An overview of participants is given in Table 1.

In addition to the 20 per cent of responses from colleagues leading education-related programmes in FE colleges in England, participants were also drawn from two categories of university: Russell Group and ‘pre-92’ universities, and ‘post-92’ universities (Bamford and Pollard, 2019; Sbaifi and Bennett, 2019). The analysis below focuses on the questionnaire responses of participants who worked in further education settings, but it also compares their responses with those of the higher education-based participants where relevant. All interview quotations are drawn from our further education-based interviewees.

**Table 1. An overview of programme leaders participating in the research (Source: Authors, 2023)**

	Phase 1: questionnaire	Phase 2: follow-up interviews
FE colleges	14 (20%)	4
'Post-92' universities	46 (66%)	4
Russell Group and other 'pre-92' universities	10 (14%)	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>11</b>

## Findings and discussion

### Profiling further education programme leaders

With regard to the recruitment of further education-based programme leaders, it was notable that the majority of our questionnaire respondents achieved their positions in ways other than straightforward internal or external application. While five of the further education questionnaire respondents reported that they had actively applied (internally or externally), a further six were either asked or told to assume the role, sometimes latterly discovering that the role was linked to another job for which they were applying. The remainder had come to the role in other ways, for instance, having originally developed the programme or taken over in a temporary capacity – this then leading implicitly to programme leadership in the longer term. Only one in four further education-based interviewees had applied for their position as an external candidate, seeing this as a potential 'career stepping stone'. This situation was not unique to further education, however, and our higher education-based questionnaire participants reported a very similar balance of open applications versus other routes to appointment. Indeed, as Whitchurch et al. (2019: 11) note in their survey of university career trajectories, 'informal opportunities and relationships may be as significant in career development as formal structures and processes'.

Within further education, models of internal progression from within teams, and the incremental promotion of colleagues originally employed on casual, part-time and hourly paid contracts, have been common in sectors connected to education (for example, Noel, 2006) and, in some cases, individuals from related careers (for example, within childcare) have been recruited directly to lecturing positions (for example, Colley, 2006). In the context of the lifelong learning ecology introduced above, such career trajectories serve as a reminder that individual staff members accrue valuable craft wisdom associated with their particular meso and micro layers, not only during, but also well before, and en route to, programme leadership. In relation to adult education, Garnett and Ecclesfield (2014) note that it is these individuals, as opposed to managerial hierarchies, who hold essential, yet tacit, knowledge required for their programme continuities. This not only emphasises their position as a keynote species, but also highlights the potential for institutional precarity, should these individuals choose to move on.

Of the 13 out of 14 further education-based questionnaire participants who gave their highest qualifications, all held master's degrees. Several further education-based interviewees told us that these were regarded as a requirement to teach teacher undergraduate students in their setting. Three of the further education-based questionnaire sample held, or were soon to achieve, doctoral qualifications. This was in contrast to 50 per cent of the higher education-based programme leaders' sample who held doctorates. Additionally, one of the further education-based interviewees had started a PhD, but had found it too challenging to balance this, their full-time role and family commitments. Another was planning to study for their PhD upon retirement, also regarding their full-time role combined with family life as incompatible with doctoral study. Kadi-Hanifi (2020) identifies a developing research culture emerging within some quarters of the further education-based higher education teaching community, noting that many further education employers will also sponsor, or at least encourage, their higher education staff to undertake doctoral study. This said, it is possible that this culture is more established within the field of education. For instance, Noel (2006) found that those working in various areas of post-compulsory teacher education were more likely to hold master's and doctoral qualifications than the general further education workforce.

Nevertheless, the desire that some further education programme leaders in our research expressed to gain further postgraduate qualifications was tempered by the pressures on their time, and by limited institutional support. Set against the need to manage the demands at macro (for example, the complex alignment of vocational and academic provision), *exo* (for example, institutional relationships emerging from administrative, regulatory and delivery partnerships) and *micro* (for example, the diverse heterogeneity of the student and wider community bodies) layers, the work of the further education programme leaders is directed towards multiple priorities other than engagement in scholarly activity (Feather, 2011; Schofield and Burton, 2015). One interviewee told us that they had felt unable to take up the opportunities for scholarship that had initially been offered alongside the programme leading role, perceiving instead that their professional focus needed to remain on immediate, day-to-day responsibilities. Unfortunately, by the time this programme leader subsequently felt that they 'understood the job' (Interviewee 1), the college had withdrawn these opportunities. In another case, an interviewee had abandoned any hope of developing a scholarly profile through institutionally-provided continuing professional development (CPD). Instead, they had completed a master's degree externally:

All the CPD that's on offer in the college itself is all really targeted at further education, which is fine and they have tried ... for [an] HE focus, but we've gone over to [another college site in the same organisation], for example, and it's sort of like nearly the same thing and then after this I think, oh, I've seen this before, so I invested my own money in CPD and it's nothing to do with college because there's ... definitely no CPD opportunity as far as HE in FE is concerned. (Interviewee 3)

Yet, despite the challenges, for this group of college lecturers who straddle further education and higher education, the additional status that an advanced research degree and an active research profile promise remains compelling, and it can be seen as a form of 'equalisation' between themselves and their higher education partners. Many participants demonstrate an interest in developing what we define below as sightlines, in wanting to look through and beyond their institutional contexts via research and scholarship. We return to this issue later on.

In terms of teaching qualifications, 10 of the further education questionnaire participants held Post-16 Postgraduate Certificates of Education, with a minority holding either Primary or Secondary School Postgraduate Certificates or Diplomas of Education. Five of 14 further education programme leaders (36 per cent) held fellowship of the Higher Education Academy at one of the four available levels. In comparison, 66 per cent of the higher education-based programme leaders' sample were similarly qualified. As with postgraduate qualifications, distributions of teaching qualifications illustrate the distinct 'gravitational pulls' of macro layers of further and higher education respectively. As Simmons and Lea (2013) note, in the absence of specific professional standards for teachers of HE in FE, members of this workforce have had to choose whether to align themselves with the professional standards and qualifications of the post-compulsory sector, or with those of higher education, notably the Higher Education Academy UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF).

As of 2013, Simmons and Lea noted that engagement with the UKPSF remained 'patchy' within further education, not least because college principals still expected post-compulsory teaching qualifications to support staff engagement with further education learners. Rapley (2014) identified not only a need for greater support for further education colleagues teaching higher education to achieve Higher Education Academy fellowship, but also a need for them to undertake higher education-specific teaching qualifications, for example, the PGCert. This distinction indicates one way that leaders of higher education programmes in further education find their 'view' beyond the institutional demands obscured, and how different, better ways of working can be missed when the particular needs of higher education learners and teachers fall outside a more standardised model of further education provision.

Two of our further education-based interviewees had been products of the further education system themselves, having pursued post-16 teacher education programmes as mature students. The other two interview participants had previously worked as a secondary school teacher and a primary school teacher, respectively. In all four cases, it was noticeable that the further education-based interviewees had moved relatively fluidly between different subject disciplines and/or educational phases and settings, before taking on their current roles. Added to the craft knowledge accrued since assuming programme leadership, it can be argued that diverse experiences such as these considerably strengthen their status as a keystone species, offering much within the complex micro systems in which they work. Yet, as we

illustrate below, their ability to maximise the potential of life and professional experience can be impeded by the sometimes competing demands encountered at macro, exo and meso layers of HE in FE.

## **Experiences of the further education programme leadership role**

Drawing again on Hodgson and Spours's (2009) ecology model, we next explore aspects of the experiences and responsibilities encountered by education-related undergraduate programme leaders in further education. Our questionnaire data suggested that their programmes tended to have considerably smaller staff teams than their higher education-based counterparts. Specifically, while the mean headcount of permanent staff in the former was three, the equivalent figure was 10 within the various HEIs represented. This could result in implications for further education-based participants' programme leadership, since small team size reduced the possibility of delegation of responsibilities and demarcation between roles. As Interviewee 2 put it, 'being programme leader meant really just doing all the teaching yourself at the same time'. Moreover, our questionnaire data confirmed that over two thirds of educational-related programme leaders working in further education held line management responsibility, a higher proportion than in our higher education sample, where the figure was just one quarter. These factors add support to our characterisation of further education undergraduate programme leaders as a keystone species who, as Interviewee 2 also put it, must be 'very hands on at every level'.

Yet, while there was consensus among further education-based participants that programme leadership was multifaceted and busy, there was also a common view that the role was poorly defined, involving individuals relying primarily on craft wisdom accrued within their specific contexts. Page (2011) notes that those in such roles often supplement vague job descriptions with what they think is appropriate to do, leading to diversity and disparity in the ways that similar roles are conceived of and practiced. As one interviewee put it:

The biggest problem is that because there's no definition of a programme leader or what a programme leader is expected to do, everybody shapes it individually in their own subject area ... that then becomes very subjective. So the problem with that is that some programme leaders will do certain things and other programme leaders just won't do those things. But there's nobody saying you should all be doing that. Or you shouldn't be doing that. The problem with that is that there is disparity ... What is the role? What are you expected to do? (Interviewee 1)

Despite a perceived absence of a general 'job description' for further education undergraduate programme leadership, we identify three overall strands of responsibility in our participants' views of their role, and we consider these within the four levels of Hodgson and Spours's (2009) ecology. These responsibilities revolve around: the administrative and organisational demands of their colleges and higher education partners; the provision to learners of appropriate support in their studies; and the recognition of and response to the pastoral needs of their students. Our categorisations are in line with Page's (2011: iv) findings that the work of first-tier managers in further education takes shape around the 'trialectic of students, team and organisation'.

### ***Administrative and organisational demands of programme leaders' colleges and higher education partners***

The most clearly defined of these programme leaders' responsibilities tended to relate to the administrative and organisational contexts of their colleges and their validating/franchising institutions. In turn, these reflect aspects of the macro and exo layers highlighted above. For instance, participants mentioned the importance of responding to the contemporary marketised context through the generation of course publicity and attendance at recruitment events. Similarly, they stressed the importance of performance management through annual self-evaluation audits and responses to the National Student Survey. Managing the 'accreditation of prior learning' processes for students who were joining from other institutions or returning to study was a further responsibility. It was also relatively common for programme leaders to teach on, if not also manage, courses in related, 'caring' subjects, including social work and early childhood.

Questionnaire data revealed that relationships with validating and franchising institutions often went beyond the various kinds of quality assurance processes that included programme modifications, assessment moderation and examination boards. In particular, around a third of further education-based programme leaders responses mentioned that HEIs involved further education partners in programme development or assessment/moderation activities, sometimes coordinating these contributions across all delivering institutions. A similar number of responses also mentioned joint programme delivery with either the HEI or through a consortium of further education partners who worked with the same validator/franchiser. As a result, the further education-based interviewees tended to regard liaison with external academic colleagues as an important part of their role – we will return to the importance of these kinds of ‘sightlines’ beyond the immediate institutional context in our conclusion. Nonetheless, in the case of at least one further education programme leader, such liaison could be a source of tension:

I have this strange role where I’m sat pleasing external colleagues, [and an] external institution, but at the same time, I’m trying to comply with what’s actually happening in my organisation, so I see a lot of pressures put on the staff in my organisation that you wouldn’t normally see in a normal lecturing role. (Interviewee 4)

Internal liaison was also reported as challenging and problematic at times. For example, in situations where line management responsibility was *not* held by programme leaders, there was sometimes a sense of being ‘stuck in the middle’ between more junior and more senior colleagues, and not being able to effectively solve the issues faced due to a perceived lack of influence:

So if you ask somebody to do something that’s part of the programme, they should really do it. There should be that level of trust that, you know, if I’m asking you to do this work, it’s because it needs to be done. No one should have run off to my line manager and say ‘he’s not allowed to ask me’. (Interviewee 1)

### **Providing learners with appropriate support**

This second strand of responsibility related to the academic content, expectations and culture of provision in further education. Consistent with the description of the meso layer, above, of central importance here were the means by which programme leaders offered their learners support to meet the demands of their studies and an environment in which their identities as undergraduates could develop. Our questionnaire data showed that undergraduate student cohorts tended to be smaller within further education settings than in higher education, generally having between 11 and 20 students per year. Our further education-based interviewees saw both advantages and challenges in the smaller numbers found in their context. In one case, high levels of academic achievement across a small cohort were put down to students being supportive and collegiate: ‘they attend every lesson, they attend their tutorials, they talk to each other all the time’ (Interviewee 1). However, in another case, small numbers were regarded as a limiting programme breadth because optional modules were not economically viable. Moreover, three out of four of our further education-based interviewees described having to combine students on different programmes and/or working at different levels to obtain sustainable class sizes. A single programme leader might have to teach on, and manage, all of these:

So I’ve got [groups including Levels] 5, 6 and 7, so I’ve got a real mixture ... My timetable is very creative. My scheme of work is very creative ... There’s a lot of balls juggling. I often get the feedback from the students ‘I don’t know how you’ve done this’, and, you know, ‘we just go with the flow’. Because at the beginning of a session, I’ll say, ‘right, so for this group of students, I’m hitting these criteria, [and] for this group of students, I’m hitting these criteria, just bear with me, you’re okay, just go with the flow’ ... But it works ... it’s very interesting having that mix within there. (Interviewee 4)

Despite the pedagogical challenges that these kinds of creative, integrated models entailed, another interviewee felt that there were definite benefits for students in terms of academic development and progression:

Sounds mad, but I remember somebody saying, that’s how you do it [differentiated teaching in the same group]. I’m like, ‘that can’t be right and this is against the fundamentals of how we



educate. You don't get some Level 3 learners and teach them at Level 6. What happens to the other levels?' But for some reason, putting lower level learners in an environment where we're getting them to break down and question things allows them to excel in the [pre-graduate] Cert Ed. And when they come to the BA Education, they've already set themselves up. They've already started to develop a different way of thinking ... I've been programme leader for [all the students progressing through different courses] from day one. So they've had interaction with me and different module leaders [and so the students have] that kind of ethos that we embed ... because three years is a long time to be around people that have an ethos on how they educate. (Interviewee 1)

Beyond supporting their learners to develop their critical thinking skills, our further education-based interviewees reported feeling a professional responsibility to nurture a higher education 'culture' within their contexts in further ways. This could be a challenge, particularly when, as illustrated above, courses were not grouped with other undergraduate provision, but instead within an education subject area, which might embrace various sub-degree level courses. While the latter might provide potential benefits in terms of student progression and academic development, there was also the risk of reduced potential to promote a more 'specialist' higher education culture. For instance, two further education-based interviewees reported that their courses were based in higher education 'centres' or 'hubs', with the possibility of distinct management arrangements, working conditions and policies from the FEI of which they were ultimately part. As the first of these interviewees told us, while such an arrangement had worked very well in their view, it was now endangered by greater pressure to follow further education procedures and absorb larger student numbers:

We're outgrowing the University Centre. They seem to be validating courses largely without thought for how they're going to be physically accommodated. That worries me slightly because we're going to end up spilling back into the FE College. And I don't think that's a university experience ... it's a bit of cash cow ... That worries me a bit that we may shift back into just being in the college with the further education students, which our [higher education] students don't like. It's not what they expect, screaming teenagers! (Interviewee 2)

According to the second interviewee, their higher education centre had not only evolved a different ethos and identity from the rest of the institution, it had also led to concomitant benefits for staff members' potential to engage in scholarly activity:

We actually have a designated HE centre which is all self-enclosed. We have a study area in there, we have a common room there, we have teaching classrooms, and all the staff are ... designated HE staff. So, we are a unit within the college, if you like. [The higher education head has been] trying to move that forward as an identity, that 'yes, this is [the college's] HE department', and trying to move the scholarly activity a bit further forward. (Interviewee 4)

Yet, as noted earlier, while the notion of undertaking 'scholarship' activities (for example, research, conference presentation and book reviews) was typically regarded by our further education-interviewees as concomitant with undergraduate teaching, the extent to which it was actually *possible* to engage in such activities varied.

### **Recognising and responding to students' pastoral needs**

The third strand of responsibility identified among further education-based programme leader participants related to somewhat intangible, yet very keenly perceived feelings of pastoral – perhaps even personal – responsibility towards their students. As the following pair of interview quotations illustrate, and consistent with the keystone species concept, programme leaders tended to see themselves as central to the learning journeys of their students, offering support and care that was perhaps not readily available from other professionals in their view:

We are involved in everything from recruitment to initial enrolment right through to the very end when they get their grades and we are the 'go to' people for our students. They don't have anybody else that they go to for information. So we do have to know everything, or know who to go to, to get answers. (Interviewee 2)

From the mental well-being point of view, sometimes, someone could be struggling, and ... I can just post a quick response [on a messaging service used by staff and students] ... I know, ultimately ... the weekend is my time, but if a student is struggling like that, I want them to be able to ... you know, I don't want to get an email on Monday morning saying that somebody had a mental breakdown on Friday and no one was available and they committed suicide. I've spoken to people that have had that happen. (Interviewee 1)

Aligned with the excerpts above, the further education-based interviewees reported responding strongly to the perceived needs of their communities and related social and economic factors. There is a particular resonance here with the notion of further education-based programme leaders 'nurturing' or 'stewarding' their learners as a form of social justice, as described above in relation to the micro-layer ecology. A belief in students' rights to access education and knowledge was a core focus. These factors were perhaps most notable at the intersection of student gender and life stage. The participant below spoke thoughtfully about some of the tensions that existed when working with adult women:

One thing I have noticed quite a lot is when we do the critical thinking, a lot of the women ... start to feel really empowered in regards to taking control of their own lives. And I felt a bit bad at first because I was like, 'I feel like everyone's just going to end up breaking up with their husbands ... because I'm just teaching these women how to think for themselves'. And, ultimately, that has happened for a few of them. They started to not be so conditioned, and they started to be a bit more free in how they think. And that's caused conflict. Because I think ... where I live, there's a lot of men very threatened by a smart woman. (Interviewee 1)

Further education-based undergraduate provision is presented by our participants as an empowering force in the lives of people who might otherwise not have accessed this level of study or this kind of provision. As Kendall and Mitchell (2020: 61) note, notions of the 'transformative impact of higher education' are deeply entrenched within the philosophy of many college-based higher education professionals, and this was certainly true for our interviewees based in this sector. One noted:

Quite a lot of my students ... were actually not very happy in their own education ... They're now teaching assistants, and they want to have this as a second opportunity ... a second chance in their life to go and do a degree, and very often ... the younger [students] ... are the first ones to get a degree in their family, so ... yeah ... widening participation is definitely applicable to our courses. (Interviewee 3)

While our further education-based interviewees reported supporting individuals to progress in training-related careers in public sector organisations and local industry, the majority of students planned to move into teaching. Many students were already working as teaching assistants or volunteering in schools and colleges, but they would not have the opportunity to progress to postgraduate teacher training without a degree. The college-based provision offered by the interviewees enabled these students not only to study part-time and locally, but also, in some cases, to take advantage of parallel on-site opportunities such as GCSE mathematics and English retakes needed to subsequently achieve qualified teacher status.

Further education programme leaders reported that the breadth and diversity of their career backgrounds supported and facilitated these career trajectories. Several reported actively applying their own teacher training experiences to support their students, for instance, by bringing basic mathematics and literacy pedagogy into their programmes, and by timing assessments so that these could provide portfolios of evidence to be taken to teacher education interviews. Perhaps because of these motivations, further education programme leaders in our questionnaire were more likely than those within universities to regard the development of flexible learning opportunities (such as part-time or work-based programmes) as a key priority. Yet, at the same time, they also felt that offering this flexibility could lead to tensions with institutional policies more attuned to 16–19 students:

For years, we have felt like ... HE in FE always seems to be straitjacketed into FE regulations that don't necessarily match with what we do with our HE students. They always try to use [a particular brand of student recording and monitoring software] that they use in FE, and it's a great program ... but it's just not that suitable for our students, and [the college management] just can't get it in their heads that it actually doesn't work for HE – but [the higher education

students] have to be part of FE, so we have to do it. And that is a constant frustrating thing. (Interviewee 3)

As the above excerpt illustrates, the three strands of responsibility we identified in programme leaders' responses (for the administrative and organisational demands of their colleges; for providing learners with appropriate support in their studies; for recognising and responding to the pastoral needs of their students) did not always sit easily with each other. There was a sense in which one or other of these tended to preoccupy the programme leaders at any one time, to the point of obscuring their view of other important role objectives. As our following conclusions argue, further education-based programme leaders require effective 'sightlines' through these kinds of demands, if these are to be balanced with their deeply held commitments to their students and communities.

## Conclusion

The research reported in this article illustrates the competing role demands perceived by those who lead education-related undergraduate programmes of HE in FE. Using the ecosystems metaphor, this article has considered the interconnected systems of HE in FE, and it helps focus attention on the possibilities that programme leaders have to anchor and nurture the ecology that supports this important form of provision for local people, communities and economies.

Programme leaders have described tensions that exist as a result of the competing demands of their role, particularly where the macro and exo layers of the ecosystem (for instance, making sense of HE-in-FE policy and navigating franchising/validating relationships 'on the ground') overshadow and *obscure* the work that often means most to them at the meso and micro layers of student well-being and success. Deep reserves of time and energy are required to navigate this ecology, and the programme leaders perceive limits in their abilities to make HE in FE work effectively for students.

Our analysis considered programme leaders as a keystone species who hold central, anchoring roles in local learning ecologies (Nardi and O'Day, 1999). Concurrently, we highlighted the ways that programme leaders feel that their routes are sometimes barred, or their 'views' obscured. We introduced the concept of sightlines to highlight the conflicts that exist here: the programme leaders are continually 'turned inwards' to deal with internal responsibilities and stresses of their FELs' demands, yet they feel that they could be more effective operating as keystone species, should they be enabled to 'turn outwards' more often. Through engaging beyond their institution, programme leaders see opportunities for improving the provision of their institution and the micro-level concerns that are so important to them. We argue that these sightlines might be developed through, for example, greater opportunities and encouragement to undertake research and other scholarly work, along with enhanced opportunities to engage with relevant academic communities. (It was the case that none of our four further education-based interviewees had heard of the BESA, for instance.) Going beyond existing relationships with validating/franchising higher education partners (valued extremely strongly by several further education-based interviewees), greater opportunities to form developmental partnerships with local employers and networks with other FELs and HEIs in their locality are also important. While we regard the implementation of improved sightlines for higher education-based programme leaders as similarly important, the fact that their further education-based counterparts are already one step removed from many of the academic networks and support structures typically found within universities is a particular concern.

Nonetheless, it would be unfair to claim that all of the issues raised in this article are unique to the further education context, and our parallel samples confirmed that higher education-based programme leaders contend with many equivalent challenges pertaining to that sector. In both cases, these appear to have their roots in the often-ill-defined role of programme leader, and the resulting impact on professional identities. Within higher education, programme leaders face challenges comparable to those outlined in this article, and these can be exacerbated by attempts to carve out a 'home' for undergraduate education studies programmes within larger social sciences faculties, to remain distinct from initial teacher education provision and to counter perceptions of being a 'low-status' university subject (Pulsford et al., 2021). In the case of those leading higher education programmes within FELs, however, the various challenges are typically amplified due to the specific characteristics of the lifelong learning ecology in these settings, as documented above.

The overall aim of the research project on which this article draws was to understand how undergraduate education-related programmes are faring within contemporary UK higher education and further education contexts. With regard to the latter, the findings presented here confirm that programme leaders are fundamental to the health, sustainability and success of programmes, not least because of their status as a keystone species within lifelong learning ecologies. They draw not only on a range of professional, academic and personal attributes, but also on considerable hard-to-come-by and sector-specific craft wisdom to support their learners' journeys through this ecology. Such attributes and wisdom can, we argue, only benefit from better sightlines through and beyond the further education sector, supporting programme leaders to innovate and effect change in the field. Further research will thus be important to understand and highlight this ecology and its challenges for those charged with leading undergraduate provision within further education.

## Funding

This study was funded by the 2019/20 British Education Studies Association Research Grant.

## Declarations and conflicts of interest

### Research ethics statement

The authors declare that research ethics approval for this article was provided by the Department of Education Studies at the University of Warwick.

### Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

### Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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