

Will Thomas, Miles Cole

University Campus Suffolk, United Kingdom

Higher Education in the liminal zone: the clarifying and blurring of sector boundaries (0178)

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This paper questions whether the boundary between the higher and further education sectors has been clarified or blurred by the creation of a new higher education institution in Suffolk. Whilst taking HE delivery out of the FE colleges has served to clarify their purpose and allow them the opportunity to restate their role, the necessity for partnership working and to take HE delivery out of the main population centre and closer to rural communities has resulted in a blurring of boundaries. Rather than being presented as a problem to be overcome, the positioning of University Campus Suffolk in this 'liminal zone' is presented as a way to address the challenges of low aspiration, low rates of participation in HE and of delivering effective learning in a rural environment. Lessons from this unique development will be of interest to other universities and colleges seeking to engage with communities with similar characteristics.

Higher Education in the liminal zone: the clarifying and blurring of sector boundaries

The boundary between higher and further education delivery in Suffolk was clarified when a new institution for the delivery of higher education was launched in August 2007 replacing a number of mixed forms of HE delivery in FE colleges. This paper explores how two forms of partnerships created to implement this project have resulted in a re-blurring of this boundary. We suggest that whilst this new approach complicates the structural picture, it suits the rural nature of the County and is a creative way of addressing issues of low aspiration and low rates of participation. The resulting discussion will be of interest to other universities and colleges seeking to engage with communities with similar characteristics.

University Campus Suffolk (UCS) was created in 2007 as a way of increasing the number of undergraduate places in the East of England. From its inception, the intention was for UCS to be a university *in* the community and with real engagement with business and with the County's population. Two ways of achieving this through partnership working are discussed in this paper: the use of FE colleges to deliver UCS courses, and the creation of multi-agency centres for taking education advice and delivery into the community.

Work completed by the East of England Development Agency (EEDA) and the Association of Universities in the East of England (AUUE) in 2006, identified a shortfall of 39,000 undergraduate places in the region. The decision to create UCS was a response to this regional need and primarily justified through recourse to economic arguments about the impact of a university and the role it might play in driving economic regeneration in the sub-region (Thomas and Funnell, 2007).

In one sense, the creation of UCS reinforces the boundary between further and higher education, representing a “repositioning” of post-secondary education in the County (Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009). Prior to 2007, Suffolk College had very significant amounts of directly-funded higher education. Here, the creation of UCS in August 2007 split the existing FE College’s provision into two new institutions: UCS (HE) and Suffolk New College (FE). Across the rest of the County and in Great Yarmouth (Norfolk), in the other FE colleges, HE delivery was indirectly-funded and on a much smaller scale. In these colleges all HE delivery is now part of UCS.

Within Suffolk College, Dearing’s challenge that further education colleges should take a leading role in the expansion of higher education (NCIHE, 1997) was abandoned after a period in which this approach had achieved significant success. This new attempt to expand the level of higher education provision in Suffolk and reposition delivery in the post-secondary institutions has reinforced the boundary between the FE and HE sectors. Rather than continue with successful ‘dual-sector’ (Garrod and Macfarlane, 2006) or ‘hybrid’ (Smith, Bathmaker and Parry, 2007) institutions a new form of higher education institution was created in UCS.

The rural nature of the County, low levels of aspiration and the low baseline levels of participation in higher education presented a challenge of delivery to UCS. As well as a purpose built main campus in Ipswich, UCS also runs courses at each of the FE colleges within the County and in Great Yarmouth. For these purposes, the colleges are referred to as ‘centres’ and whilst the course is branded as UCS, the staff delivering it are employed by the colleges and teaching and other spaces are frequently shared.

The centres located at FE colleges deliver a range of courses reflecting areas of expertise and historical specialism. The centre at UCS Otley, for example, offers courses in land-based studies (amongst others) reflecting that college’s tradition in these subjects. These centres, referred to collectively as the ‘Learning Network’, reflect a commitment to ensuring that UCS is able to maximise accessibility and to adopting innovative approaches to the delivery of HE.

The development of Learning and Enterprise Access Points (LEAPs) is another example of how an innovative approach to overcoming the challenges of developing a new HE institution in a primarily rural area has challenged existing boundaries between education sectors and settings. The LEAP project was conceived as a multi-agency response to issues of low aspiration and underachievement in the post-secondary population in Suffolk. University Campus Suffolk is the lead partner in the project which includes the further education colleges in the County, the County Council, the District Councils, Jobcentre Plus, the Learning and Skills Council, Suffolk IAG, Suffolk Youth and Connexions and Suffolk Chamber of Commerce. Seven centres have been opened across the County, taking information, advice, training and learning out into the community with the aim of reducing barriers to training and learning.

In addition to being information points, the LEAP Centres are locations for delivery of learning at all levels from non-qualificatory courses right up to postgraduate modules. Taking opportunities for learning out into the community and seeking to engage with those that have no previous experience of HE is an important part of the UCS business plan and an example of its social purpose.

This paper presents the unique approach taken in Suffolk to the creation of a new HE structure as simultaneously clarifying and confusing of the boundaries between HE and FE. It shows that addressing the complex issues of low aspiration and low rates of participation within a rural environment requires a creative approach. In order to be successful in widening participation, UCS has embraced a partnership approach to working which will be of interest to other universities seeking to engage with communities in similar circumstances.