

1 **Research methods teaching in vocational environments: developing critical engagement**
2 **with knowledge?**

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21 **Abstract**

22
23 Knowledge of research methods is regarded as crucial for the UK economy and
24 workforce. However, research methods teaching is viewed as a challenging
25 area for lecturers and students. The pedagogy of research methods teaching
26 within universities has been noted as underdeveloped; with undergraduate
27 students regularly expressing negative dispositions to the subject. These are
28 challenges documented in university-based HE, yet little is known of the
29 practices and pedagogies of research methods teaching in the college-based HE
30 setting, where the delivery of HE has grown in prominence in recent years.
31 Because college-based HE is widely regarded as primarily vocational,
32 incorporating research methods into curricula may be seen as an additional level
33 of complexity for staff to negotiate. In this paper we report on data collected
34 within a study to examine research methods teaching in Social Science
35 disciplines on HE programmes taught in college-based settings in England.
36 Drawing on data obtained from college-based HE lecturers and students we
37 discuss features of research methods teaching and how these may be applied
38 with a diverse student body, within vocationally-focused institutions. Issues of
39 institutional culture, resourcing and staff development are also considered as

40 these are identified as integral to the successful embedding of research methods
41 teaching.

42

43 **Keywords:** Widening participation, Foundation degrees; research-based curricula; HE
44 in FE

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48 **Introduction**

49 Further education (FE) colleges in England have had a longstanding commitment to the
50 provision of higher education (HE) (Parry 2009). This provision offered is largely perceived
51 as fulfilling a particular remit: primarily vocational, work-based and employer led, reflecting
52 the established position of colleges as preparing students for the local economy and having
53 close links with employers (Bathmaker and Avis 2005). Given this, it is often assumed that
54 the students studying within FE colleges are doing this alongside other commitments and are
55 predominantly part-time learners (HEFCE 2006). College HE students have also been
56 described as less academically integrated (Crozier, Ray and Clayton 2010). Additionally, the
57 long tradition of sub-degree level qualifications means that colleges HE provision is often
58 perceived as restricted to this level. However, HE in colleges has become more diverse as a
59 consequence of successive government policies regarding the accessibility and funding of HE
60 (Parry 2006).

61

62 FE colleges were placed at the forefront of HE expansion following the Dearing Report
63 (Dearing 1997) and the following white paper *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES 2003).
64 These acknowledged the unique position of FE colleges with respect to their links with
65 communities and employers, and therefore were viewed as ideally positioned to take forward
66 agendas around Widening Participation, Lifelong Learning and increased participation in HE
67 (Parry 2010; Blunkett 2000). This triggered a period of growth (Parry 2009), which was
68 supported by favourable public funding, and supported via organisations such as the Higher
69 Education Academy (HEA), Foundation Degree Forward, and the Association of Colleges.
70 Policymakers were keen to address concerns that the Higher National Diplomas / Certificates
71 had fallen out of favour with employers and that enrolments on these programmes were in
72 decline (DfEE 2000). A new qualification was perceived as a means of redressing this
73 balance (DfES 2003) and creating a bridge for articulation onto honours degrees' (Robertson

74 2002). Foundation Degrees (FD) were identified by HEFCE as connecting the academic-
75 vocational divide between universities and colleges (HEFCE 2002). FDs built on the
76 traditional FE values of work-based learning and employer engagement, but were designed to
77 develop students' academic knowledge further (Parry, Blackie and Thompson 2009). This
78 was recommended firstly through the provision of the environment and resources
79 'appropriate' for HE study (Parry et al. 2009), but also, and more crucially, lecturing staff
80 embracing pedagogies of HE teaching e.g. research informed teaching, problem-based
81 learning and research-based curricula (QAA 2010). Secondly, completion of the FD
82 represented an entry route into a full honours degree as students were presented with the
83 opportunity of 'topping up' through their validating partner (Parry et al. 2009). The role of
84 universities as providers of FDs as well as partners to colleges in validation arrangements was
85 central to this initiative.

86

87 This presents a somewhat simplified picture of what has become a hugely complex area
88 (Parry 2009). In this paper we examine research methods teaching as one particular aspect in
89 the provision of HE in FE, an area which has yet to be widely considered (Burton and
90 Schofield 2011). Studies examining the experiences of non-traditional students, such as those
91 associated with college-based HE, have observed the impact of diverse entry profiles on
92 retention and achievement, with lecturers noting that supporting students 'learning how to
93 learn' is essential (Leese 2010). This issue crystallises around research methods teaching
94 which can be a difficult subject for students (of any level) to grasp (Benson and Blackman
95 2003). Indeed, for those progressing on to 'top up', the social and academic challenges
96 associated with the transition from the college to the university have been reported
97 (Greenbank 2007), but also difficulties completing a dissertation as part of the honours
98 component of their studies (Tait and Godfrey 2001). HE pedagogies, particularly research
99 methods teaching, which can emphasise independent study, are sometimes seen as at odds
100 with FE practices which are ingrained within the college (Bathmaker et al. 2008). Therefore
101 research methods teaching, and the pedagogies associated with its teaching, have crept up the
102 agenda of college-based HE (Burton and Schofield 2011). This agenda is also usefully
103 viewed from the perspective of how critical engagement with knowledge is employed within
104 an environment that some have argued is increasingly defined as 'teaching only' (Esmond
105 2012). Drawing on qualitative and quantitative data collected from college-based students
106 and staff using a range of methods, we consider the issues and challenges associated with
107 research methods teaching in English FE colleges.

108

109 **Research methods teaching within the HE curriculum**

110 We feel it is important to frame our study in the context of research methods teaching
111 with regards to university-based HE, as this is an important reference point on which
112 college-based HE lecturers can draw. Arguably, scholarship is what makes HE unique
113 and separates it from other levels of education (Lea and Simmons 2012). Through
114 scholarship students become active participants in their learning; they go beyond
115 acquiring knowledge to shaping it, developing criticality, becoming analytical and
116 moving toward independence in their learning (Lea, 2014). As the quotation below
117 suggests, by engaging in scholarship students can develop skills and expertise
118 important to their future careers:

119

120 Teaching students to be enquiring or research-based in their approach is not just
121 a throwback to quaint notions of enlightenment or liberal education but central
122 to the hard-nosed skills required of the future graduate workforce (Jenkins,
123 Healey and Zetter 2007: 3).

124

125 A number of different approaches have been used to promote the integration of scholarship
126 and scholarly practice into HE teaching. Healey, Jenkins and others have written about the
127 benefits of encouraging students to be more scholarly, advocating the use of inquiry-based
128 learning and promoting curriculum design that see students undertaking research as part of
129 their everyday studies (Jenkins and Healey 2005; Healey and Jenkins 2009). However, the
130 extent to which these pedagogies have been adopted is variable (Wagner, Garner, and
131 Kawulich 2011). This is partly due to the limited recognition gained for those who go
132 beyond the standard practice of including contemporary knowledge in their teaching (Healey
133 2000) but more widely there is evidence of inadequacies in the training of those responsible
134 for teaching research skills (MacInnes 2010; British Academy 2012). If this is an area for
135 concern for university-based HE lecturers, as we will go on to consider, the implications of
136 this situation could be significant for college-based HE lecturers.

137

138 Research methods teaching has therefore become a site of contention. Although the benefits
139 of integrating research methods teaching into curriculum are firmly established, rarely does
140 this happen (MacInnes 2010; Rice et al. 2001). Frequently research methods are taught as
141 standalone modules to large cohorts of students in preparation for their dissertations (Benson

142 and Blackman 2003). Teaching research methods in this way creates a false perception of
143 research methods equating to a technical skill, particularly with respect to quantitative
144 research method (Benson and Blackman 2003; MacInnes 2012). Students taught using this
145 approach demonstrate limited awareness of the relevance of research methods to other
146 aspects of their degree programmes, creating future problems when required to apply this
147 knowledge in the workplace (MacInnes 2012). This has been recorded as been particularly
148 acute with social science graduates (Rice et al. 2001). A further consequence of standalone
149 delivery was exemplified by a study which examined the teaching and learning of this subject
150 with Sociology students. They demonstrated resistance to learning about research methods,
151 particularly quantitative data, although the use of quantitative research methods had been
152 widespread in the degree as a whole (Williams, Collett and Rice 2004). Similar studies have
153 recorded a preference amongst students to write essays rather than analyse data, highlighting
154 factors such as disinterest, anxiety and a lack of confidence with respect to the use and
155 analysis of quantitative research methods (MacInnes 2012; Williams et al. 2008; Shober et al.
156 2006).

157

158 **Research methods in college-based HE**

159 The situation surrounding research methods teaching in universities has been described as
160 representing the cultural marginalisation of the subject within the social sciences (MacInnes
161 2010, 16). It is important to be aware of this when examining the teaching of research
162 methods in college-based HE. Colleges are frequently described as centres of teaching and
163 vocational education, where primary research is generally associated with the advancement
164 of knowledge within a university context, and referenced by students in support of their
165 studies (Child 2009). Research, therefore, is not an activity widely engaged with by FE
166 lecturers. Studies have examined the challenges for those staff wishing to become research
167 active in support of their HE teaching, with the challenges lecturers face been widely
168 documented (Turner et al. 2009; Young 2002; Anderson et al. 2003). However, although
169 Child (2009) and others make reference to student engagement with 'research' little is known
170 regarding the form of this research, how and where it takes place and the contribution it
171 makes to students development.

172

173 As in university-based HE, curriculum space is restricted; indeed, curriculum space in the FE
174 is pressured given the diverse entry profiles of students which mean they often need support
175 in developing their study skills, the academic-vocational crossover, and the dual end points of

176 employment or further study (QAA 2010). The majority of FD graduates progress on to
177 further study; the 2012-13 Destination of Leavers from HE data indicated that whilst only
178 14% of graduates from a full degree engaged in further study following graduation, 48% of
179 FD students moved on to higher study (HESA 2014). Therefore there is a clear requirement
180 for FD providers to prepare students for ‘topping up,’ as well as offering sufficient support
181 for those with a desire to move directly into the workplace. Part of this preparation will
182 include developing their knowledge of research methods to support dissertation level work.

183

184 The vocational focus of colleges could represent an additional pressure impact on the
185 allocation of curriculum space to research methods (Bathmaker 2013; Lea and Simmons
186 2012). Vocational education, and therefore the knowledge base it draws upon, is based on a
187 discourse of workplace readiness with the emphasis placed upon the development of skills
188 rather than knowledge (Bathmaker 2013). These ‘skills’ can be interpreted as representing
189 (measurable) abilities relating to activities such as communication, numeracy, computer
190 literacy, and to a range of interpersonal or generic attributes that can be transferred to a
191 number of professional contexts (DfCSF 2009). Recent research (e.g. Bathmaker, 2013;
192 Guile, 2010) has again acknowledged the importance of theoretical knowledge within the
193 sphere of vocational education. In the context of vocational education, theoretical knowledge
194 is contested; it is commonly referred to as abstract and perceived as removed from the skills
195 focus of many FE colleges (Bathmaker 2013; Doyle 2003). Theoretical knowledge underpins
196 the appropriate application of research methods and analysis of resulting data, therefore
197 explicit consideration of the theoretical foundations of research is essential. However, little is
198 known as to how this aspect of research methods training is addressed in college-based HE,
199 and given the concerns of Bathmaker (2013) and Doyle (2003) this is an area that warrants
200 further attention.

201

202 Critical engagement with knowledge, and critical thinking, are skills integral to higher
203 education (Lea 2014). They relate to students abilities to solve problems and address
204 questions or challenges. It goes beyond the simple acquisition of facts to decision making,
205 experimentation, evaluation, integration and synthesis, all skills that are employed in
206 research, and therefore fundamental to the teaching of research methods (Lea 2014; Rippen et
207 al. 2002). As we will go on to explore, these are skills that can be difficult for students to
208 comprehend and develop as students can perceive them as abstract and they need to be

209 supported by pedagogic techniques that stimulate higher-level learning (Jenkins & Healey
210 2005).

211

212 A further consideration is the background of college-based HE lecturers. Commonly college-
213 based HE lecturers have a diverse professional profile, in that they entered teaching from
214 employment, with their professional knowledge and skills leading to them securing a
215 teaching role in a college (Turner et al. 2009). Progression into HE teaching is a consequence
216 of ‘circumstances’ in many cases (Turner et al. 2009). This means that the base on which
217 they develop their HE teaching may be largely informed by their FE experiences, and, as
218 noted above, given the low profile of research in colleges, the opportunities for HE lecturers
219 to develop their knowledge of this area can be restricted.

220

221 Based on the evidence presented above, the position of research methods teaching in college-
222 based HE varies widely. In some colleges the role of research methods teaching could be
223 emergent, whereas in others it may be contested and in others, firmly established. By
224 undertaking this national level study we sought to provide insights into the situation
225 regarding research methods teaching and learning in English FE colleges and the experiences
226 of both staff and students in engaging with this part of the curriculum. Questions on the
227 critical engagement with knowledge, institutional support for research and scholarship and
228 the dual sector remits of vocational and academic education in the college environment are
229 integral to this study.

230

231 **Methodology**

232 Following an in-depth review of literature relating to research methods and pedagogies of
233 research methods teaching two questionnaires were designed, one for completion by students
234 and a second to be completed by lecturers involved in teaching research methods and
235 programme leads. Each questionnaire captured demographic information (e.g. gender, age).
236 The student questionnaire was split into five sections. Through section one contextual
237 information (e.g. college name, programme studying, level / mode of study, background
238 qualifications) were collected. In section two we used a four-point Likert scale (strongly
239 agree to strongly disagree, with an additional opt out category) to capture students reactions
240 to a number of statements regarding different research methods potentially encountered
241 during their studies. Section three used a series of yes / no response questions to gauge
242 students’ awareness of methodological concepts. Next we explored preferred methods of

243 learning about research methods and the resources (e.g. library / software) available to
244 support their learning. Finally we captured their confidence in undertaking both qualitative
245 and quantitative research using a 10 point scale. The staff questionnaire again captured
246 contextual information (e.g. role, proportion of teaching at HE level, disciplinary area),
247 section two explored the delivery of research methods teaching and assessment, section three
248 used a four-point Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree, with an additional opt out
249 category) to examine their knowledge and confidence in teaching research methods. Finally
250 we explored the resources available to support their teaching and also engage with / develop
251 their capacity as researchers. In this final section several open questions were included which
252 sought to capture further information to inform the second stage of data collection.

253

254 Each questionnaire was piloted with further refinements made as a result of feedback. The
255 questionnaires were administered using Survey Monkey and available for completion
256 between the 8th March and 14th April 2013. In order to gain insights into research methods
257 teaching across college-based HE in England, we distributed the surveys extensively through
258 partnership email lists in the South and North West and via groupings such as the Association
259 for Collaborative Provision of Higher Education in England, the Staff and Educational
260 Development Association, Universities Council for the Education of Teachers HE in FE
261 group and the college-based HE mailing lists of the HEA. As the organisation and role of
262 college-based HE varies across the four nations of the UK (Gallacher et al., 2006), we took
263 the decision to focus specifically on provision in England. Although this may be seen as
264 geographically limiting the scope of the study, it provides congruence with the organisational
265 parameters of education policy in England.

266

267 A total of 162 respondents were yielded from the lecturer questionnaire and 127 respondents
268 for the student survey. Whilst we acknowledge this is a small response rate for the student
269 survey, given the short timeframe over which the survey was open, and also the provisional
270 nature of this study we felt this was sufficient to provide initial insights into this under
271 researched area. Student response rates to on-line surveys are lower, even when incentivised,
272 than paper-based surveys (Nulty, 2008). However, on-line administration does have clear
273 advantages with respect to reaching diverse sample populations and broad geographic
274 coverage. With respect to the staff survey, again, the overall size of the sample population is
275 not known, but in 2011 the HEA had approximately 1,000 managers, lecturers and support
276 staff registered on its national college-based HE mailing list (Outram, pers. comm.) therefore

277 if we use this a guide, we have a response rate that aligns with comparable studies in this area
278 (e.g. Brew et al., 2011).

279

280 The disciplinary groupings designated by the HEA were used to identify respondents from
281 the social sciences. Qualitative responses were analysed thematically with members of the
282 research team independently reviewing data, developing codes and then coming back
283 together to refine these (Silverman 2011). The outcomes of this analysis formed the basis of
284 two focus groups, which were used to corroborate findings emerging from the questionnaire
285 around research methods teaching, training and staff development in support of research /
286 research methods teaching and allow greater exploration of these findings with college-based
287 HE practitioners (Silverman 2011). Nine participants for the focus groups were purposefully
288 selected from those who volunteered to contribute further to the research following
289 completion of the questionnaire. We selected participants to encompass a range of social
290 science disciplines and ensured we included those in lecturing and management positions.
291 The focus groups were held in two different locations in order to maximise participation and
292 ensure we gained representation from a range of college-based HE providers. Each focus
293 group lasted for approximately one hour and was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and
294 subsequently analysed using the same approach as the qualitative questionnaire responses.
295 The message wall was implemented as a response to many staff expressing interest in the
296 project but being unable to participate in focus groups. In total, 17 participants engaged with
297 the message wall discussions which ran from May until June. In reporting these data we
298 indicate the source using the following coding: QU – questionnaire, FG – focus group and
299 MW – message wall.

300

301 **Results**

302 **College-based HE lecturer responses**

303 *Profile of respondents*

304 College-based HE is hugely variable in size; HEFCE (2003) guidance sought to
305 accommodate this by suggesting the development of infrastructure and resources to support
306 HE teaching should be informed by the presence of a ‘critical mass’ of HE provision. Given
307 that we obtained responses from lecturers employed at 55 colleges, and obtained their college
308 name, we were able to examine the pedagogies and resourcing of research methods teaching
309 with respect to college size. We drew on data compiled by HEFCE using HESA and ILR
310 records, an approach used in similar studies (e.g. Parry et al. 2012) to categorise college size

311 according to HE student numbers. Respondents were then attributed to one of the following
312 categories: 1000+, 500-999 and 1-499 (Table 1).

313

314 [Place Table 1 here]

315

316 As discussed, many college lecturers enter teaching from what could be referred to as a non-
317 traditional route. Considerable time may have passed since they themselves undertook their
318 own undergraduate studies / conducted any research. Therefore the currency of their
319 knowledge regarding research methods, and also more recently the software developed to
320 support research activities, may be variable (Turner et al. 2009). The majority of our
321 respondents fall in the 40-49 and 50-59 age categories (Table 2) therefore there is the strong
322 likelihood that staff development is necessary to ensure currency in their knowledge and
323 pedagogic practice. This issue is explored in further detail below.

324

325 [Place Table 2 here]

326

327 ***Research methods teaching***

328 Respondents were presented with a comprehensive list of ‘subjects’ that could be taught in
329 order to develop students’ knowledge and competencies with research methods (Table 3). It
330 is noteworthy that lecturers concentrated on ‘literature searching’ and ‘qualitative research
331 methods’ with ‘reporting research’, ‘quantitative research methods’ and ‘research paradigms’
332 receiving least attention (Table 3). This was not unanticipated, in a limited curriculum space
333 which is expected to incorporate a vocational dimension; these theoretically driven aspects of
334 curriculum are likely culprits for elimination. **But it is likely to have implications for the
335 development of higher-level, problem solving which is based on skills such as integrating,
336 synthesising and evaluating knowledge and data to reach conclusions.** Literature searching
337 and qualitative research methods were perceived as more palatable aspect of research
338 methods teaching which can be integrated amidst a framework for wider academic skill
339 development. Indeed, this was a theme emerging from the qualitative data:

340

341 ‘Research methods is "just another skill" but combines so many other areas of
342 overlapping skills, experience and knowledge. The reading of books (or not!) is my
343 major concern.’ MB

344

345 Only 43.8% of respondents' include 'research paradigms' in their teaching. Research
346 paradigms represent the foundational knowledge upon which methodological and analytical
347 decisions should be made (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2009). Its limited coverage could mean
348 that students are only developing a partial awareness of the research process and may be, if
349 progressing to 'top up' their FD, lack the conceptual knowledge on which to defend their
350 research. Focus group respondents were aware of this position and clearly struggled to
351 reconcile this:

352

353 'I don't think they're ready for it because I'm trying to get mine to try and work out
354 why they've done that project, where their values, where their beliefs come from, and
355 that's about as far as we can go. And some of them can question it and then they can
356 start to look at their assumptions and how that may impact on the research. That, at
357 level five, I'm finding for my students anyway, that's probably as far as we can take it
358 because I don't think they're ready for it.' FG

359

360 It may also be a consequence of the skills-knowledge debate, which, as discussed above, has
361 seen FE colleges adopt a vocational focus to their teaching to the detriment of theoretical
362 aspects of the curriculum. Indeed, this is intimated at with respect to student engagement
363 with this subject:

364

365 'I think it's, I would say it's to do with linking to what matters to them. If you can get
366 them to see the relevance to what they are core interested in then they catch. If that's
367 not possible then they shut off against it and it takes a long time to get back in to it.'
368 FG

369

370 A deficit in research methods teaching has been discussed with respect to the teaching of
371 research methods in university-based provision (e.g. MacInnes 2012; British Academy 2012).
372 We have also considered the challenges of negative student attitudes and anxiety leading to
373 resistance amongst students to learning about this subject (Williams et al. 2008). Although
374 'reporting research' was included, only 46.6% of respondents taught this with respect to
375 'literature searching' (which 76.5% taught). To a certain extent there is an overlap in some of
376 the skills drawn upon (e.g. formulating arguments, synthesising literature) in both literature
377 searching and reporting research, but the problem solving and critical thinking with respect to
378 analysing data and solving problems that are also required in the reporting of research will be

379 overlooked if curriculum time is concentrating on literature searching (Table 3). A number
380 of issues could be influencing the breadth of research methods integrated into college-based
381 HE curricula. It could indicate the lack of familiarity generally with this aspect of the
382 research process as studies (Anderson et al. 2003; Schofield and Burton 2013) have
383 documented a general lack of confidence and knowledge surrounding the reporting and
384 dissemination of research outcomes for college-based lecturers seeking to become research
385 active. However, data gathered which sought to examine whether respondents had sufficient
386 knowledge to teach these aspects of research methods indicates that they felt they did (Table
387 4). This is clearly a complex issue, and, as we will go on to discuss, issues of currency of
388 knowledge, curriculum space and student profiles may also be influencing practice in this
389 area.

390

391 [Place Table 3 here]

392

393 [Place Table 4 here]

394

395 Following on from this it is useful to consider the format and pedagogy of research methods
396 teaching (Tables 5 and 6). Research methods are most commonly taught as programme
397 specific lectures, through 1:1 tutorials, in small groups or as workshops, although as Table 7
398 indicates there may be some variation with respect to college size. This format of teaching
399 supports the pedagogies respondents identified as commonly using e.g. independent study,
400 practical exercises and project / problem-based learning (Table 5). Both the format of
401 teaching and pedagogies employed are in line with those cited as promoting student
402 engagement and building their confidence with this subject (e.g. Benson and Blackman,
403 2003). In contrast to universities, college-based research methods provision appears to be
404 more programme-specific, integrated into wider teaching and learning activities, as indicated
405 through the use of approaches such as practical exercises and problem-based learning. The
406 importance of this was also considered in the focus group:

407

408 'I know on our foundation degree programmes the research skills, which is a level
409 four module, was originally taught lecture style to all of the students all together and
410 supported in tutorials by staff members in their specialism area. But they came from a
411 huge disparity of foundation degrees to come together to be delivered that, and it
412 wasn't necessarily for the benefit of the student, but it was definitely beneficial for the

413 bottom line. Actually that has changed recently; we've gone to a more specialist
414 model.' FG

415 Such integration follows the recommendations of the British Academy (2012) and MacInnes
416 (2012) with respect to ensuring students understand both the context and application of
417 research methods, and evidence is emerging of this taking place with respect to research
418 methods been taught as part of themes central to the FD (e.g. work-based learning, employer
419 engagement):

420

421 'The Work Based Learning Unit involves submitting a proposal for one of the design
422 aspects of a sustainable building. Once the proposal has been agreed with the client /
423 employer and tutor the assignment will require research and analysis to be carried out
424 for the design aspect involved and the submission of a report on the conclusions and
425 recommendations proposed.' QU

426

427 As the next extract indicates, the primary consideration of the research project is vocational
428 relevance:

429

430 'Students are required to propose and complete a research project that is vocationally
431 relevant'. QU

432

433 This extract is indicative of the focus on vocational or work-based learning as a driver
434 underpinning research methods teaching, which is evident throughout the data. When
435 combined with data relating to aspects of research methods taught/not taught (Table 3), a
436 pattern emerges of a model of teaching that is primarily packaged as developing skills for
437 vocational tasks. This approach aligns with the requirements of FDs and ensures shared
438 curriculum space for meeting FD benchmarks, as well as the pedagogic impetus for delivery.
439 This observation needs to be framed alongside the non-traditional profile of FD students, and
440 the potential implications this can have with respect to students needing to learn how to learn,
441 again an issue raised within the focus groups:

442

443 'I think, for the purpose for foundation degrees within the courses that I teach on or
444 have taught on, the actual process of research they don't get there yet. So we do,

445 particularly in the early years foundation degree, one of the modules is about teaching
446 research methods rather than actually doing it, because they're not there yet.' FG

447 Indeed many of the pedagogies listed in Table 6 are widely used in colleges as they are seen
448 as that supporting students' academic development as a whole (Turner et al., 2009). These
449 data have already indicated that the breadth of research methods teaching may be somewhat
450 limited, so whilst colleges may be employing pedagogies conducive to research methods
451 teaching, this finding needs to be considered alongside the limitations identified (Table 3) and
452 the profile of the student body.

453

454 [Place Table 5 here]

455 [Place Table 6 here]

456 [Place Table 7 here]

457

458 *Engaging students with research methods teaching*

459 Similar to university-based students, our data indicate engaging students with research
460 methods teaching is challenging. Although the quantitative data demonstrate that 59.5% of
461 respondents find it easy or very easy to engage students in research methods teaching when
462 related to real life scenarios (Table 8), respondents found it more difficult to engage them
463 (Table 9) when framed in terms of progression or future career development. This reinforces
464 the challenges noted around student attitudes and engagement with research methods in
465 university-based HE (e.g. McInnes, 2012; Williams et al., 2008). This is supported through
466 the qualitative data, where examples were recorded of students questioning the relevance of
467 research methods teaching, and also examples of lecturers trying to integrate research
468 methods to real-life scenarios to promote perceived relevance:

469

470 'There's so many transferable skills there and that's how I sell it. So I get a [...] why
471 do I have to do research, because it's [a] core module, so I sell the transferable skills
472 now, researching, in the literature being sent. I just find it quite hard, I don't know
473 about you, hard to sell it as a module, "Why do we have to do this as a core
474 module?"' FG

475 'Legal research is essential, so the inclusion of primary legal sources is essential for
476 all law modules. In Year 1 an initial Skills Assessment assesses students' ability in

477 finding and using primary legal sources, and in Year 2 students undertake an extended
478 essay on a subject of their choice. The project proposal, literature review and final
479 essay all illustrate the depth/extent of research skills.’ QU

480

481 [Place Table 8 here]

482 [Place Table 9 here]

483

484 The issue of student engagement aligns with the challenges identified in university settings.
485 For colleges, who focus on meeting vocational FD requirements, we argue that there is a
486 strategy employed in using this as a focus of research methods teaching. However, despite the
487 generally positive attitudes towards research methods based on real-life and professional
488 contexts, (Tables 8 and 9) there seems to be a sizable minority who still find difficulty in
489 using the vocational levers as a stimulus:

490

491 ‘The idea is for them to be enthusiastic about the topic, to want to, to be, I can’t
492 motivate them if I give them a question and they hate me for the year [...]. They’ve
493 got, and they don’t like it, to actually go, “What do I want to research?” Well, this is
494 almost catch 22, isn’t it?’ FG

495

496 It would seem that the problems of student engagement cannot be easily remedied through
497 vocational alignment of research projects despite assumptions that this is the primary
498 motivator for college-based HE students. Perhaps the limited student engagement with
499 research projects aligned to so-called ‘real life scenarios’ reflects the breadth of college-based
500 HE. College-based HE is widely perceived to be vocationally orientated, with students
501 working toward achieving a higher-level qualification as part of professional training or
502 preparation (Stanton, 2009). There is no natural home for research in this environment, hence
503 the tendency to package research methods and subsequent research projects as skills based
504 around vocational settings. However, recent research demonstrated that attitudes towards
505 students’ choice of HE provider are changing (HEFCE, 2013). Increasingly decisions are
506 made based on costs, with factors such as proximity and ability to balance wider
507 responsibilities, making the college-based HE option more attractive to a wider proportion of
508 students (Prospects, 2010). In some geographic locations (e.g. rural areas) college-based HE
509 may be the only option as illustrated by the trend for the comparative growth of full-time HE
510 programmes in colleges (Gray and Stone, 2014). Consequently, the remit of many college-

511 based HE providers has extended to include FDs that are aligned more explicitly to a specific
512 discipline rather than been vocationally orientated. In these instances adopting an employer-
513 focused research project or implementing research methods activities aligned to ‘real-life
514 scenarios’ may have a mixed reception from students. More widely the diverse entry profile
515 of students means that the extent to which they are confident in engaging with research
516 methods provision is also highly variable.

517

518 There is no easy solution to engaging students with research methods teaching, with careful
519 consideration of the student profile, the focus of the FD, connections to vocational and
520 disciplinary traditions and students ambitions following graduation with respect to further
521 study or entry to the work place, all factors those responsible for teaching research methods
522 should heed. The advantage, as discussed here, for much college-based research methods
523 teaching is that small group / programme specific activities provides staff with the
524 opportunity to cater for individual students. The challenge is in equipping staff with the
525 appropriate professional updating opportunities to facilitate this for their learners.

526

527 *Research capabilities of college-based HE lecturers*

528 The relationship between research and teaching within universities is an issue that has
529 received considerable attention (Brew and Boud 1995; Healey 2000). Although sought after,
530 researchers have been unable to provide an unequivocal link between research activity and
531 teaching quality (Brew and Boud 1995). However, for the college-based HE lecturer a link
532 between research activity and teaching is one that needs further consideration, particularly
533 with respect to the integration of research methods into their teaching and ensuring the
534 currency of lecturers’ pedagogic practice.

535

536 Reference has already been made to the low level of research activity that takes place within
537 FE colleges, a situation mirrored by our respondents (Table 10). Higher study (e.g. masters
538 / PhDs) was identified as an important avenue for many to access research. But even when
539 funding was forthcoming, respondents were reliant on their own motivation and time to
540 undertake this work. Work which many felt was vital to the currency of their practice and
541 central to their teaching of research methods:

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543 ‘But it is done in our own time, rather than considered an essential part of delivering
544 HE qualifications.’ QU

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‘OK if supported by training and development but a lack of depth within area alongside a deficit in updating and development and hands-on research experience can present a weakness in research methods teaching.’ QU

‘Research methods can be difficult enough [...] without the added pressure of staff members having no recent experience to draw on.’ MW

[Place Table 10 here]

The lack of institutional support, recognition, a culture of discussion / ideas sharing and also a lack of knowledge about the research process (e.g. applying for funding, disseminating research outcomes) were challenges reported by respondents. Indeed, these are barriers discussed elsewhere as hindering the development of research and scholarship in colleges (Anderson et al. 2003; Turner et al. 2009). High teaching loads confound this situation, as many FE lecturers are contracted to teach in excess of 800 hours per academic year (Lea and Simmons 2012). Although HEFCE (2009) advocated the use of arrangements with a college’s validating partner as a potential way of stimulating the development of scholarship and research activity through the mutual exchange of ideas and expertise, as Table 11 demonstrates, the majority of respondents were not provided with such opportunities. Given the lack of expertise within colleges and the limited opportunities provided through their validating partner, this raises a potentially alarming issue regarding how college-based HE lecturers can enhance their knowledge of research and scholarship, not only in support of research methods teaching but also in support of their HE teaching more generally. This issue needs to be considered alongside the finding that 99% of respondents either strongly agreed (69.7%) or agreed (29.4%) that their knowledge in research methods was gained through their own qualifications (Table 12). Similarly, 81.9% strongly agreed or agreed that they gained this knowledge through their own professional training, and 94% through their own practical experiences. As we intimated earlier, the age profile of our respondents (Table 2) indicates, that for the majority, it may have been sometime since they completed their own studies, and had first-hand experience of undertaking research. Therefore it is not only in universities where the development and training opportunities for research methods teaching appear to be lacking (MacInnes 2010), clearly in college-based HE there is an urgent need to also address this issue.

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579 [Place Table 11 here]

580 [Place Table 12 here]

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582 **College-based HE student responses**

583 *Profile of respondents*

584 In contrast to the prevailing perception of college-based HE students studying part-time
585 (HEFCE, 2009) the majority of respondents identified themselves as undertaking their studies
586 full time (Table 13). This is a pattern that has been noted in similar studies (e.g. Gray and
587 Stone 2014), and whilst not the focus of the current study does raise some questions that
588 warrant further investigation regarding the profile of students undertaking FDs, and what has
589 caused this shift in the modes of study.

590

591 [Place Table 13 here]

592

593 Whilst most respondents were studying at levels 4 and 5 (Table 13), some are studying at
594 level 6, (the final years of honours study) and a minority studying at level 7 (postgraduate).
595 Further analysis of these respondents indicated that they were registered on courses relating
596 to teacher training. Whilst it was expected that most respondents would by studying FDs the
597 presence of level 6 respondents may be indicative of the growth of provision at this level
598 following the Browne Review. Although representing a limited number of respondents, their
599 presence further warrants the need for development of college-based HE lecturers with
600 respect to teaching and supporting research as students studying at this level are likely to be
601 required to complete independent research as part of their studies.

602

603 [Place Table 14 here]

604

605 Indeed further evidence emerged regarding this issue through questioning around the
606 software packages students used to analyse research data (Table 15). Although there has
607 been proliferation in software to support data analysis, respondents indicate limited
608 experience of software beyond those readily available through Microsoft (e.g. Excel / Access)
609 (Table 15). The more specialist forms of analytical software that may be better designed, or
610 knowledge of may be desired by employers were rarely encountered. Further investigation is
611 necessary, but was beyond the scope of the current study, to explore why students have

612 limited experience of these other packages. However, based on the data obtained relating to
613 the research development of college-based HE lecturers, and literature relating to research
614 methods teaching in university-based HE (e.g. Coombs & Rybacki 1999; MacInnes, 2009),
615 this is likely to be owing to a combination of factors of which cost is likely to be the
616 contributing factor.

617

618 [Place Table 15 here]

619

620 **Conclusion**

621

622 This research provides initial insights into the teaching of research methods within the social
623 sciences, considering practice, attitudes and culture surrounding its delivery in college-based
624 HE in England. Parallels are emerging between college and university provision in relation to
625 the resourcing and support of RM teaching; however the focus of these issues is determined
626 by the structural and cultural foundations of different institutions. Within colleges the
627 resourcing implications are those relating to fundamental requirements such as software and
628 training, as well as a commitment to higher academic qualifications as a basis for staff
629 engagement with research. There are related issues on the place of research as an expected
630 activity of staff and whether it is considered to be of value in developing the capacity of staff
631 in research methods teaching.

632

633 Small group teaching and a range of integrated pedagogies have often been cited as a distinct
634 feature of college-based HE and this aspect of resourcing is evident within the data. Larger
635 colleges show a greater tendency toward stand-alone delivery, as opposed to integration of
636 research methods across provision. An integrated approach would seem to be more common
637 where a smaller body of HE provision exists. One assumption is that we are observing
638 economies of scale, where smaller providers can rationalise programme-specific (and more
639 integrated) forms of research methods teaching, with small cohorts not supporting the
640 amalgamation of research methods teaching. This is an area which would benefit from further
641 investigation.

642

643 Another issue emerging from this research relates to the constrained curriculum space for
644 research methods teaching. This is an area we were only able to make provisional inferences
645 regarding, and warrants further consideration particularly with respect to reviewing and

646 mapping research methods curricula. Such work could substantiate the emerging findings
647 regarding the attention given to different aspects of research methods teaching (e.g. literature
648 searching, theoretical foundations and reporting research), and where this fits with the range
649 of subjects and skills FDs are required to include. As a two year degree with a vocational
650 benchmark requirement we became aware of the pressures faced in curriculum development.
651 This is presented alongside the requirements necessitated for the large numbers of students
652 who use the FD as an articulation route to a level six honours degree. These multiple
653 requirements in terms of skills and knowledge means that research methods are pragmatically
654 translated as a vocationally based project within many programmes. The implications of this
655 are demonstrated in some of the empirical findings on lower levels of theoretical and
656 conceptual engagement with research. This may have implications for students progressing to
657 level six programmes where there is less emphasis on vocational practices as the foundation
658 of knowledge than within the FD.

659

660 One of the assumptions that can be increasingly challenged is the role of college HE as
661 exclusively catering for a brand of vocational HE. These assumptions can also viewed
662 alongside the demographic profile of college HE students, which remains grounded in
663 notions of widening participation. The accessibility of college HE provision means that it is
664 not only a location for vocationally orientated qualifications, but an institution that offers a
665 route into HE, or simply a more local and flexible version of HE. Discussions of academic
666 drift (Neave 1979; Garrod and Macfarlane 2009) or the purpose of the college (Wheelahan
667 2009) aside, if college-based HE is to grow and fulfil multiple functions then aspects of
668 curriculum such as research methods remain central concerns for practice notwithstanding the
669 emphasis on vocational and work-based learning that has been associated with this
670 development.

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