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

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Knowledge of research methods is regarded as crucial for the UK economy and workforce. However, research methods teaching is viewed as a challenging area for lecturers and students. The pedagogy of research methods teaching within universities has been noted as underdeveloped, with undergraduate students regularly expressing negative dispositions to the subject. These are challenges documented in university-based higher education (HE), yet little is known of the practices and pedagogies of research methods teaching in the college-based HE setting, where the delivery of HE has grown in prominence in recent years. Because college-based HE is widely regarded as primarily vocational, incorporating research methods into curricula may be seen as an additional level of complexity for staff to negotiate. In this article, we report on the data collected within a study to examine research methods teaching in social science disciplines on HE programmes taught in college-based settings in England. Drawing on data obtained from college-based HE lecturers and students, we discuss features of research methods teaching and how these may be applied with a diverse student body, within vocationally focused institutions. Issues of institutional culture, resourcing and staff development are also considered as these are identified as integral to the successful embedding of research methods teaching.

Keywords: widening participation; foundation degrees; research-based curricula; HE in FE

Introduction

Further education (FE) colleges in England have had a longstanding commitment to the provision of higher education (HE) (Parry 2009). This provision offered is largely perceived as fulfilling a particular remit: primarily vocational, work-based and employer-led, reflecting the established position of colleges as preparing students for the local economy and having close links with employers (Bathmaker and Avis 2005). Given this, it is often assumed that the students studying within FE colleges are doing this alongside other commitments and are predominantly part-time learners (HEFCE 2006). College HE students have also been described as less academically

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integrated (Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2010). Additionally, the long tradition of sub-degree-level qualifications means that colleges HE provision is often perceived as restricted to this level. However, HE in colleges has become more diverse as a consequence of successive government policies regarding the accessibility and funding of HE (Parry 2006).

FE colleges were placed at the forefront of HE expansion following the Dearing report (Dearing 1997) and the following white paper 'The Future of HE' (DfES 2003). These acknowledged the unique position of FE colleges with respect to their links with communities and employers and therefore were viewed as ideally positioned to take forward agendas around widening participation, lifelong learning and increased participation in HE (Blunkett 2000; Parry 2010). This triggered a period of growth (Parry 2009), which was supported by favourable public funding, and supported via organisations such as the Higher Education Academy (HEA), Foundation Degree (FD) Forward, and the Association of Colleges. Policymakers were keen to address concerns that the Higher National Diplomas/Certificates had fallen out of favour with employers and that enrolments on these programmes were declining (DfEE 2000). A new qualification was perceived as a means of redressing this balance (DfES 2003) and creating a bridge for articulation onto honours degrees (Robertson 2002). The FD was identified by HEFCE as connecting the academic–vocational divide between universities and colleges (HEFCE 2002). FDs built on the traditional FE values of work-based learning and employer engagement, but were designed to develop students' academic knowledge further (Parry, Blackie, and Thompson 2009). This was recommended firstly through the provision of the environment and resources 'appropriate' for HE study (Parry, Blackie and Thompson 2009), but also, and more crucially, lecturing staff embracing pedagogies of HE teaching, e.g. research informed teaching, problem-based learning and research-based curricula (QAA 2010). Secondly, completion of the FD represented an entry route into a full honours degree as students were presented with the opportunity of 'topping up' through their validating partner (Parry, Blackie, and Thompson 2009). The role of universities as providers of FDs as well as partners to colleges in validation arrangements was central to this initiative.

This presents a somewhat simplified picture of what has become a hugely complex area (Parry 2009). In this study, we examine research methods teaching as one particular aspect in the provision of HE in FE, an area which has yet to be widely considered (Burton and Schofield 2011). Studies examining the experiences of non-traditional students, such as those associated with college-based HE, have observed the impact of diverse entry profiles on retention and achievement, with lecturers noting that supporting students 'learning how to learn' is essential (Leese 2010). This issue crystallises around research methods teaching which can be a difficult subject for students (of any level) to grasp (Benson and Blackman 2003). Indeed, for those progressing on to 'top up', the social and academic challenges associated with the transition from the college to the university (Greenbank 2007) and also difficulties in completing a dissertation as part of the honours component of their studies (Tait and Godfrey 2001) have been reported. HE pedagogies, particularly research methods teaching, which can emphasise independent study, are sometimes seen as at odds with FE practices which are ingrained within the college (Bathmaker et al. 2008). Therefore, research methods teaching, and the pedagogies associated with its teaching, has crept up the agenda of college-based HE (Burton and Schofield 2011). This agenda is also usefully viewed from the perspective of how critical engagement

with knowledge is employed within an environment that some have argued is increasingly defined as 'teaching only' (Esmond 2012). Drawing on qualitative and quantitative data collected from college-based students and staff using a range of methods, we consider the issues and challenges associated with research methods teaching in English FE colleges.

Research methods teaching within the HE curriculum

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

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

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

Research methods teaching has therefore become a site of contention. Although the benefits of integrating research methods teaching into curriculum are firmly established, rarely does this happen (MacInnes 2010; Rice et al. 2001). Frequently research methods are taught as standalone modules to large cohorts of students in preparation for their dissertations (Benson and Blackman 2003). Teaching research methods in this way creates a false perception of research methods equating to a technical skill, particularly with respect to quantitative research method (Benson and Blackman 2003; MacInnes 2012). Students taught with this approach demonstrate limited awareness of the relevance of research methods to other aspects of their degree programmes, creating future problems when required to apply this knowledge in the workplace (MacInnes 2012). This has been recorded as been particularly acute with social science graduates (Rice et al. 2001). A further consequence of standalone delivery was exemplified by a study which examined the teaching and learning of this subject with sociology students. They demonstrated resistance to learning about

research methods, particularly quantitative data, although the use of quantitative research methods had been widespread in the degree as a whole (Williams, Collett, and Rice 2004). Similar studies have recorded a preference amongst students to write essays rather than analysing data, highlighting factors such as disinterest, anxiety and a lack of confidence with respect to the use and analysis of quantitative research methods (MacInnes 2012; Shober et al. 2006; Williams et al. 2008).

Research methods in college-based HE

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

As in university-based HE, curriculum space is restricted; indeed, curriculum space in the FD is pressured given the diverse entry profiles of students which mean they often need support in developing their study skills, the academic–vocational crossover and the dual end points of employment or further study (QAA 2010). The majority of FD graduates progress on to further study; the 2012–13 Destination of Leavers from HE data indicated that whilst only 14% of graduates from a full degree engaged in further study following graduation, 48% of FD students moved on to higher study (HESA 2014). Therefore, there is a clear requirement for FD providers to prepare students for 'topping up,' as well as offering sufficient support for those with a desire to move directly into the workplace. Part of this preparation will include developing their knowledge of research methods to support dissertation-level work.

The vocational focus of colleges could represent an additional pressure impact on the allocation of curriculum space to research methods (Bathmaker 2013; Lea and Simmons 2012). Vocational education, and therefore the knowledge base it draws upon, is based on a discourse of workplace readiness with the emphasis placed upon the development of skills rather than knowledge (Bathmaker 2013). These 'skills' can be interpreted as representing (measureable) abilities relating to activities such as communication, numeracy, computer literacy and to a range of interpersonal or generic attributes that can be transferred to a number of professional contexts. Recent research (e.g. Bathmaker 2013) has again acknowledged the importance of theoretical knowledge within the sphere of vocational education. In the context of vocational education, theoretical knowledge is contested; it is commonly referred to as abstract and perceived as removed from the skills focus of many FE colleges (Bathmaker 2013; Doyle 2003). Theoretical knowledge underpins the appropriate application of research methods and analysis of resulting data; therefore,

explicit consideration of the theoretical foundations of research is essential. However, little is known as to how this aspect of research methods training is addressed in college-based HE, and given the concerns of Bathmaker (2013) and Doyle (2003), this is an area that warrants further attention.

Critical engagement with knowledge and critical thinking are skills integral to HE (Lea 2014). They relate to students abilities to solve problems and address questions or challenges. It goes beyond the simple acquisition of facts to decision-making, experimentation, evaluation, integration and synthesis, all skills that are employed in research and therefore fundamental for the teaching of research methods (Lea 2014; Rippin et al. 2002). As we will go on to explore, these are skills that can be difficult for students to comprehend and develop as students can perceive them as abstract and they need to be supported by pedagogic techniques that stimulate high-level learning (Jenkins and Healey 2005).

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

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

Methodology

Following an in-depth review of literature relating to research methods and pedagogies of research methods teaching, two questionnaires were designed; one was to be completed by students and the second was to be completed by programme leads and lecturers involved in teaching research methods. Each questionnaire captured demographic information (e.g. gender, age). The student questionnaire was split into five sections. Through section one, contextual information (e.g. college name, programme studying, level/mode of study, background qualifications) were collected. In section two, we used a four-point Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree, with an additional opt out category) to capture students reactions to a number of statements regarding different research methods potentially encountered during their studies. Section three used a series of yes/no response questions to gauge students' awareness of methodological concepts. Next, we explored preferred methods of learning about research methods and the resources (e.g. library/software) available to support their learning. Finally, we captured their confidence in undertaking both qualitative and quantitative research using a 10-point scale. The staff questionnaire

again captured contextual information (e.g. role, proportion of teaching at HE level, disciplinary area), section two explored the delivery of research methods teaching and assessment, and section three used a four-point Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree, with an additional opt out category) to examine their knowledge and confidence in teaching research methods. Finally, we explored the resources available to support their teaching and also engage with/develop their capacity as researchers. In this final section, several open questions were included which sought to capture further information to inform the second stage of data collection.

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

A total of 162 respondents were yielded from the lecturer questionnaire and 127 respondents for the student survey. Whilst we acknowledge this is a small response rate for the student survey, given the short timeframe over which the survey was open, and also the provisional nature of this study, we felt this was sufficient to provide initial insights into this under-researched area. Student response rates to online surveys are lower, even when incentivised, than paper-based surveys (Nulty 2008). However, online administration does have clear advantages with respect to reaching diverse sample populations and broad geographic coverage. With respect to the staff survey, again, the overall size of the sample population is not known, but in 2011, the HEA had approximately 1000 managers, lecturers and support staff registered on its national college-based HE mailing list (Outram, pers. comm.); therefore, if we use this as a guide, we have a response rate that aligns with comparable studies in this area (e.g. Brew, Boud, and Un Namgung 2011).

The disciplinary groupings designated by the HEA were used to identify respondents from the social sciences. Qualitative responses were analysed thematically with members of the research team independently reviewing data, developing codes and then coming back together to refine them (Silverman 2011). The outcomes of this analysis formed the basis of two focus groups, which were used to corroborate findings emerging from the questionnaire around research methods teaching, training and staff development in support of research/research methods teaching and allow greater exploration of these findings with college-based HE practitioners (Silverman 2011). Nine participants for the focus groups were purposefully selected from those who volunteered to contribute further to the research following completion of the questionnaire. We selected participants to encompass a range of social science disciplines and ensured that we included those in lecturing and management positions. The focus groups were held in two different locations in order to maximise participation and ensure that we gained representation from a range of college-based HE providers. Each focus group lasted for approximately one hour and was

audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and subsequently analysed using the same approach as the qualitative questionnaire responses. The message wall was implemented as a response to many staff expressing interest in the project but being unable to participate in focus groups. In total, 17 participants engaged with the message wall discussions which ran from May to June. In reporting these data, we indicate the source using the following coding: QU – questionnaire, FG – focus group and MW – message wall.

Results

College-based HE lecturer responses

Profile of respondents

College-based HE is hugely variable in size; HEFCE (2002) guidance sought to accommodate this by suggesting the development of infrastructure and resources to support HE teaching should be informed by the presence of a 'critical mass' of HE provision. Given that we obtained responses from lecturers employed at 55 colleges, and obtained their college name, we were able to examine the pedagogies and resourcing of research methods teaching with respect to college size. We drew on data compiled by HEFCE using HESA and ILR records, an approach used in similar studies (e.g. Parry et al. 2012) to categorise college size according to HE student numbers. Respondents were then attributed to one of the following categories: 1000+, 500–999 and 1–499 (Table 1).

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

Research methods teaching

Respondents were presented with a comprehensive list of 'subjects' that could be taught in order to develop students' knowledge and competencies with research methods (Table 3). It is noteworthy that lecturers concentrated on 'literature searching' and 'qualitative research methods' with 'reporting research', 'quantitative

Table 1. Size of college HE provision.

No. of HE students	(%) ($n = 140$)
1000+	57
500–999	26
1–499	17
Total	100

Note: $n = 140$, missing = 22.

Table 2. Age profile of respondents.

Age	(%) ($n = 141$)
20–29	5.7
30–39	19.1
40–49	25.5
50–59	39.0
60+	10.6
Total	100

Note: $n = 141$, missing = 21.

Table 3. Aspect of research methods taught.

Research method	(%)
Literature searching	76.5 ($n = 124$)
Research design	62.3 ($n = 101$)
Research paradigms	43.8 ($n = 71$)
Primary qualitative RM	67.9 ($n = 110$)
Secondary qualitative RM	64.8 ($n = 105$)
Primary quantitative RM	59.9 ($n = 97$)
Secondary quantitative RM	58.0 ($n = 94$)
Reporting research	46.6 ($n = 86$)

research methods' and 'research paradigms' receiving least attention (Table 3). This was not unanticipated, in a limited curriculum space which is expected to incorporate a vocational dimension; these theoretically driven aspects of curriculum are likely culprits for elimination. But it is likely to have implications for the development of high-level, problem-solving which is based on skills such as integrating, synthesising and evaluating knowledge and data to reach conclusions. Literature searching and qualitative research methods were perceived as more palatable aspect of research methods teaching which can be integrated amidst a framework for wider academic skill development. Indeed, this was a theme emerging from the qualitative data:

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

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

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

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

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

A deficit in research methods teaching has been discussed with respect to the teaching of research methods in university-based provision (e.g. British Academy 2012; MacInnes 2012). We have also considered the challenges of negative student attitudes and anxiety leading to resistance amongst students to learning about this subject (Williams et al. 2008). Although 'reporting research' was included, only 46.6% of respondents taught this with respect to 'literature searching' (which 76.5% taught). To a certain extent there is an overlap in some of the skills drawn upon (e.g. formulating arguments, synthesising literature) in both literature searching and reporting research, but the problem-solving and critical thinking with respect to analysing data and solving problems that are also required in the reporting of research will be overlooked if curriculum time is concentrating on literature searching (Table 3). A number of issues could be influencing the breadth of research methods integrated into college-based HE curricula. It could indicate the lack of familiarity generally with this aspect of the research process as studies (Anderson, Wahlberg, and Barton 2003) have documented a general lack of confidence and knowledge surrounding the reporting and dissemination of research outcomes for college-based lecturers seeking to become research active. However, data gathered which sought to examine whether respondents had sufficient knowledge to teach these aspects of research methods indicates that they felt they did (Table 4). This is clearly a complex issue, and, as we will go on to discusses, issues of currency of knowledge, curriculum space and student profiles may also be influencing practice in this area.

Following on from this it is useful to consider the format and pedagogy of research methods teaching (Tables 5 and 6). Research methods are most commonly taught as programme-specific lectures, through 1:1 tutorials, in small groups or as workshops, although as Table 7 indicates there may be some variation with respect to college size. This format of teaching supports the pedagogies respondents identified as commonly using, e.g. independent study, practical exercises and project/problem-based learning (Table 5). Both the format of teaching and pedagogies employed are in line with those cited as promoting student engagement and building their confidence with this subject (e.g. Benson and Blackman 2003). In contrast to universities, college-based research methods provision appears to be more

Table 4. I feel that I have sufficient knowledge and skills to teach the following aspects of research methods provision.

	Literature searching (%) ($n = 120$)	Research paradigms (%) ($n = 117$)	Reporting research (%) ($n = 116$)
Yes	94.2	61.5	86.2

Note: Responses in four-point ordinal scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree including an opt out category.

Table 5. Format of research methods teaching.

Teaching format	(%)
Lectures dedicated to one programme	51.2 ($n = 83$)
Lectures delivered to more than one programme	29.0 ($n = 47$)
Small group teaching	40.7 ($n = 66$)
Workshops	38.3 ($n = 62$)
Seminars	28.4 ($n = 46$)
Online teaching	13.6 ($n = 22$)
1:1 tutorials	42.6 ($n = 69$)

Table 6. Pedagogy of research methods teaching.

Teaching pedagogy	(%)
Problem-based learning	37.7 ($n = 61$)
Project-based learning	55.6 ($n = 90$)
Independent study	61.7 ($n = 100$)
Practical exercises	50.6 ($n = 80$)

Table 7. How research methods are taught by size of college HE provision.

	No. of students (%)			
	1000+	500–999	1–499	Total
Stand-alone research methods modules	46.7	22.2	22.2	37.5
Integrated into other aspects of course provision	20.0	4.5	2.3	25.0
Both	17.8	33.3	0.0	19.4
None of the above	15.6	16.7	33.3	18.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note: $n = 72$, missing = 90.

programme-specific, integrated into wider teaching and learning activities, as indicated through the use of approaches such as practical exercises and problem-based learning. The importance of this was also considered in the focus group:

> I know on our FD programmes the research skills, which is a level four module, was originally taught lecture style to all of the students all together and supported in tutorials by staff members in their specialism area. But they came from a huge disparity of FD to come together to be delivered that, and it wasn't necessarily for the benefit of the student, but it was definitely beneficial for the bottom line. Actually that has changed recently; we've gone to a more specialist model. (FG)

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

> The Work Based Learning Unit involves submitting a proposal for one of the design aspects of a sustainable building. Once the proposal has been agreed with the client/employer and tutor the assignment will require research and analysis to be carried out

> for the design aspect involved and the submission of a report on the conclusions and recommendations proposed. (QU)

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

> Students are required to propose and complete a research project that is vocationally relevant. (QU)

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

> I think, for the purpose for FD within the courses that I teach on or have taught on, the actual process of research they don't get there yet. So we do, particularly in the early years FD, one of the modules is about teaching research methods rather than actually doing it, because they're not there yet. (FG)

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

Engaging students with research methods teaching

Similar to university-based students, our data indicate engaging students with research methods teaching is challenging. Although the quantitative data demonstrate that 59.5% of respondents find it easy or very easy to engage students in research methods teaching when related to real-life scenarios (Table 8), respondents found it more difficult to engage them (Table 9) when framed in terms of

Table 8. How easy is it to get students to engage with applying research methods to real-life scenarios?

	(%) ($n = 121$)
Very difficult	1.7
Difficult	33.9
Easy	47.1
Very easy	12.4
Don't know	5.0
Total	100.0

Note: $n = 121$, missing = 41.

progression or future career development. This reinforces the challenges noted around student attitudes and engagement with research methods in university-based HE (e.g. MacInnes 2012; Williams et al. 2008). This is supported through the qualitative data, where examples were recorded of students questioning the relevance of research methods teaching and also examples of lecturers trying to integrate research methods to real-life scenarios to promote perceived relevance:

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

> Legal research is essential, so the inclusion of primary legal sources is essential for all law modules. In Year 1 an initial Skills Assessment assesses students' ability in finding and using primary legal sources, and in Year 2 students undertake an extended essay on a subject of their choice. The project proposal, literature review and final essay all illustrate the depth/extent of research skills. (QU)

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

> The idea is for them to be enthusiastic about the topic, to want to, to be, I can't motivate them if I give them a question and they hate me for the year […]. They've got, and they don't like it, to actually go, What do I want to research? Well, this is almost catch 22, isn't it? (FG)

It would seem that the problems of student engagement cannot be easily remedied through vocational alignment of research projects despite assumptions that this is the primary motivator for college-based HE students. Perhaps the limited student engagement with research projects aligned to so-called real-life scenarios reflects the breadth of college-based HE. College-based HE is widely perceived to be vocationally orientated, with students working towards achieving a higher level qualification as part of professional training or preparation (Stanton 2009). There is no natural home for research in this environment, hence the tendency to package research methods and subsequent research projects as skills based around vocational settings. However, recent research demonstrated that attitudes towards students' choice of HE

Table 9. How easy is it to get students to engage with applying research methods to future career/progression?

	(%) ($n = 120$)
Very difficult	6.7
Difficult	44.2
Easy	35.0
Very easy	7.5
Don't know	6.7
Total	100.0

Note: $n = 120$, missing = 42.

provider are changing (HEFCE 2013). Increasingly decisions are made based on costs, with factors such as proximity and ability to balance wider responsibilities, making the college-based HE option more attractive to a wider proportion of students (Prospects 2010). In some geographic locations (e.g. rural areas), college-based HE may be the only option as illustrated by the trend for the comparative growth of full-time HE programmes in colleges (Gray and Stone 2014). Consequently, the remit of many college-based HE providers has extended to include FDs that are aligned more explicitly to a specific discipline rather than vocationally orientated. In these instances, adopting an employer-focused research project or implementing research methods activities aligned to 'real-life scenarios' may have a mixed reception from students. More widely, the diverse entry profile of students means that the extent to which they are confident in engaging with research methods provision is also highly variable.

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

Research capabilities of college-based HE lecturers

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

Reference has already been made to the low level of research activity that takes place within FE colleges, a situation mirrored by our respondents (Table 10). Higher study (e.g. masters/PhDs) was identified as an important avenue for many to access research. But even when funding was forthcoming, respondents were reliant on their

Table 10. Staff provided training and development for research methods teaching through their college.

	(%) ($n = 112$)
Yes	21.4
No	71.4
Both	1.8
Don't know	5.4
Total	100.0

Note: $n = 112$, missing = 50.

own motivation and time to undertake this work, the work which many felt was vital to the currency of their practice and central to their teaching of research methods:

> But it is done in our own time, rather than considered an essential part of delivering HE qualifications. (QU)

> 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

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, Wahlberg, and Barton 2003; Turner, McKenzie, and Stone 2009). High teaching loads confound this situation, as many FE lecturers are contracted to teach in excess of 800 h per academic year (Lea and Simmons 2012). Although HEFCE 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.

Table 11. Staff provided training and development for research methods teaching through their college or validating partner.

	College (%) ($n = 112$)	Validating partner (%) ($n = 113$)
Yes	21.4	20.4
No	71.4	64.6
Both	1.8	1.8
Don't know	5.4	13.3
Total	100.0	100.0

Table 12. Where did you gain your knowledge and skills in research methods?

	Own academic qualifications (%) ($n = 119$)	Own professional training (%) ($n = 111$)	Own practical experiences (%) ($n = 117$)	Regular training (%) ($n = 104$)	Learning by doing (%) ($n = 114$)
Strongly agree	69.7	38.7	39.3	20.2	37.7
Agree	29.4	43.2	54.7	32.7	52.6
Disagree	0.0	11.7	3.4	33.7	7.0
Strongly disagree	0.8	4.5	0.9	9.6	0.0
Don't know	0.0	1.8	1.7	3.8	2.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

College-based HE student responses

Profile of respondents

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

Whilst most respondents were studying at levels 4 and 5 (Table 14), some were studying at level 6, (the final years of honours study), and a minority were studying at level 7 (postgraduate). Further analysis of these respondents indicated that they were registered on courses relating to teacher training. Whilst it was expected that most respondents would by studying FDs the presence of level 6 respondents may be indicative of the growth of provision at this level following the Browne review. Although representing a limited number of respondents, their presence further warrants the need for the development of college-based HE lecturers with respect to teaching and supporting research as students studying at this level are likely to be required to complete independent research as part of their studies.

Indeed, further evidence emerged regarding this issue through questioning around the software packages students used to analyse research data (Table 15). Although there has been proliferation in software to support data analysis, respondents indicate limited experience of software beyond those readily available through Microsoft (e.g. Excel/Access) (Table 15). The more specialist forms of analytical

Table 13. Mode of study.

	(%) ($n = 125$)
Full-time	75
Part-time	25
Total	100

Note: $n = 125$, missing = 2.

Table 14. Level of study.

	(%) ($n = 125$)
Level 4	40.0
Level 5	43.2
Level 6	13.6
Level 7	3.2
Total	100.0

Note: $n = 125$, missing = 2.

Table 15. Percentage of student respondents that have used the following analytical software packages.

	(%)
Microsoft Excel	97.5 ($n = 81$)
Microsoft Access	37.5 ($n = 80$)
SPSS	15.6 ($n = 77$)
SAS	1.3 ($n = 76$)
STATA	5.3 ($n = 76$)
R	2.6 ($n = 76$)
Minitab	4.0 ($n = 75$)
NVivo	2.7 ($n = 75$)
Atlas.ti	6.7 ($n = 75$)

software that may be better designed, or knowledge of which may be desired by employers were rarely encountered. Further investigation is necessary, but was beyond the scope of the current study, to explore why students have limited experience of these other packages. However, based on the data obtained relating to the research development of college-based HE lecturers, and literature relating to research methods teaching in university-based HE (e.g. MacInnes 2010), this is likely to be owing to a combination of factors of which cost is likely to be the contributing factor.

Conclusion

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

Small group teaching and a range of integrated pedagogies have often been cited as a distinct feature of college-based HE, and this aspect of resourcing is evident within the data. Larger colleges show a greater tendency towards stand-alone delivery, as opposed to integration of research methods across provision. An integrated

approach would seem to be more common where a smaller body of HE provision exists. One assumption is that we are observing economies of scale, where smaller providers can rationalise programme-specific (and more integrated) forms of research methods teaching, with small cohorts not supporting the amalgamation of research methods teaching. This is an area which would benefit from further investigation.

Another issue emerging from this research relates to the constrained curriculum space for research methods teaching. This is an area that we were only able to make provisional inferences regarding and warrants further consideration particularly with respect to reviewing and mapping research methods curricula. Such work could substantiate the emerging findings regarding the attention given to different aspects of research methods teaching (e.g. literature searching, theoretical foundations and reporting research), and where this fits with the range of subjects and skills FDs are required to include. As a two-year degree with a vocational benchmark requirement, we became aware of the pressures faced in curriculum development. This is presented alongside the requirements necessitated for the large numbers of students who use the FD as an articulation route to a level 6 honours degree. These multiple requirements in terms of skills and knowledge means that research methods are pragmatically translated as a vocationally based project within many programmes. The implications of this are demonstrated in some of the empirical findings on lower levels of theoretical and conceptual engagement with research. This may have implications for students progressing to level 6 programmes, where there is less emphasis on vocational practices as the foundation of knowledge than within the FD.

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

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