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Dual-sector further and higher education: policies, organisations and students in transition¹

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Colleges and universities that provide both further and higher education are a key component of government policies to expand participation in English undergraduate education. The opportunities for access and progression made available by these organisations are regarded as central. At the same time, the division of further and higher education into sectors has implications for how 'dual-sector' education is conceived and developed. Drawing on early evidence from policy interviews and fieldwork studies in four case study institutions, the influence of this division on national policy formation, organisational change and the student experience is discussed.

Keywords: further education; higher education; participation; policy; organisation; sector; transition

Introduction

Over the last 10 years, colleges and universities that combine the teaching of further and higher education have been a focus of growth and widening participation policies in English undergraduate education. These types of organisation are sometimes styled dual-sector or mixed-economy providers. They belong to one sector but some of their programmes are the primary responsibility of another sector. In England, the division of post-compulsory education into sectors is long-standing, although the number, arrangement and description of sectors have changed over time.

At present, further education colleges that provide programmes of higher education are located in the learning and skills sector, along with all other further education colleges, school sixth forms, training organisations and providers of adult and community education. In nearly all cases, the higher education taught in this sector is offered by further education colleges, usually in small amounts. Universities and higher education establishments that provide courses of further education are located in the higher education sector. Unlike dual-sector colleges in the learning and skills sector, dual-sector universities and other establishments in the higher education sector represent only a minority of its institutions.

Despite the legal basis of sectors and their member institutions, there is not always clarity or consistency in the terminology applied. For example, further education colleges are sometimes described in contemporary government documents as a sector or system themselves (DfES 2006); and the term mixed-economy is adopted by a group of the largest further education providers of higher education so that they be viewed and treated differently. In this article, we apply the term dual-sector to all organisations in either sector that offer both further and higher education, no matter how small or large the respective provision.

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Relatively little is known about further and higher education in dual-sector settings and, on a broader front, about the impact of sector separation on efforts to extend participation and enhance progression. Nevertheless, arguments for the reform, retention or removal of this divide have begun to emerge, including some early assessments – conceptual and educational – of the implications of merging further and higher education into a single system (Young 2006). In turn, these connect with larger debates about how governments structure their tertiary arrangements to achieve a shift from mass to near-universal levels of participation, and how to reconcile pressures for diversification and greater differentiation with demands for access and equity.

Alongside the dynamics of knowledge creation and specialisation, these pressures arise from the needs of a more heterogeneous student body, a changing labour market, and a globalising economy and society. Which sectors, institutions and courses take the bulk of expansion might be determined largely by government, through its allocation of functions and funding, or mainly through competition in markets for students, teachers, researchers and other sources of intellectual capital. Whatever the forms of differentiation taken in earlier systems, the increasingly important aspect at issue is ‘institutional diversification and the virtually irresistible propensity to stratification’ (Kogan 1997, 48).

Relationships between expansion, diversification and stratification in higher education remain central concerns of theory and policy, especially how they serve to reduce or reproduce patterns of social inequality (Shavit, Arum, and Gamoran 2007). Where growth occurred through hierarchical differentiation, with less-selective and lower-tier institutions absorbing much of the new demand, arguments continue about whether this should be viewed as a process of democratisation (bringing new populations into higher education) or diversion (steering them away from elite institutions and opportunities). There is much less disagreement about the competing and often contradictory tasks that confront these establishments, especially for colleges with dual-sector or comprehensive missions (Dougherty 2001).

For their part, policy-makers generally presume that a differentiated or diversified tertiary system is necessary to achieve, accelerate or accommodate major rates of growth. While many governments do not hesitate to reinforce diversity through selectivity, few are willing to accept the ‘double stratification’ – social as well as institutional – that might arise from such policies (Brint and Karabel 1989). For students, the emergence of more complex and changing forms of differentiation is reflected in their perceptions, judgements and choices about which institutions to attend. As social processes differentiated by class, race and gender, these decisions themselves ‘play a part in reconstituting and reproducing the divisions and hierarchies in higher education’ (Reay, David, and Ball 2005, viii).

The English experiment

In the case of contemporary higher education in England, a radical series of measures to diversify institutional missions and share the costs of undergraduate education are combined with specific interventions to expand participation and broaden its social base. Together they represent a major policy experiment aimed at changing the future pattern of supply and demand for education and training at the higher levels. Equally, they reflect a determination not to repeat the shape and pattern of growth that brought the breakthrough to mass higher education a decade earlier (Parry 2007).

Funded at a declining unit of resource, the dramatic and largely unplanned expansion of the late 1980s and early 1990s that produced a doubling of the participation rate for young people (from 15 to 30%) was accomplished along traditional lines (Scott 1995). Popular demand was expressed mainly for courses leading to the bachelor degree and was met mostly by establishments of higher education, the polytechnics leading this expansion and closely followed by the

universities. No new or alternative institutions and qualifications were introduced to manage this growth. Nor was reform of the standard entry requirements or admission arrangements for undergraduate education necessary to expand the system.

In contrast, public policy for the next phase of growth accorded priority to short-cycle programmes and work-focused qualifications at levels below the honours degree. As local and accessible institutions already teaching around one in nine of the undergraduate population (Parry, Davies, and Williams 2003) and as providers of academic, vocational and general education at the upper secondary and tertiary levels, further education colleges were expected to play a leading role in the expansion and diversification of English higher education. Furthermore, dual-sector establishments were seen to offer extended opportunities for access, progression and transfer, particularly for working class and non-traditional students who were the target of widening participation policies.

The influence of this two-sector division on strategies to widen participation in English undergraduate education is the subject of an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded study Universal Access and Dual Regimes of Further and Higher Education (The FurtherHigher Project). We now consider a number of the key themes and issues that arise at the three main levels of our research: at the level of national policy formation; at the level of dual-sector organisations and their partnerships and networks; and in the context of four case study institutions where, at the beginning of the project, students were studying on courses of further and higher education in the same college or university.

Policies in transition

Our investigation of the policy context for dual-sector developments is concerned with the boundary conventions and conditions produced by a division between further and higher education. The contours of the present system were set by acts of parliament in 1988, 1992 and 2000. Before this legislation, a binary structure and policy for higher education saw the local authority polytechnics and larger colleges come to rival the universities in their recruitment of first degree (bachelor) students. Higher education at the 'sub-degree' levels was offered by the polytechnics as well as among the further education colleges that provided 'advanced' courses alongside their core 'non-advanced' provision.

In 1988 the polytechnics and major colleges were removed from the local authority system to create a separate non-university sector parallel to that for the universities. The rest of further education remained with local government, with its 'prescribed' higher education supported by the new polytechnics and colleges funding council and its 'non-prescribed' higher education funded through the local authorities. When the non-university and university sectors of higher education were unified in 1992, these colleges were also removed from local government control and established in their own further education sector. Thereafter, further education came to be identified almost exclusively with qualifications at the levels below higher education, even though most colleges continued with their higher level programmes, including those sub-contracted to them by higher education establishments.

Our interviews with former senior government officials and those appointed to lead these sector bodies indicate that the new divisions and territories produced by these legislative changes owed more to specific and immediate priorities than to any overall plan or vision for the post-secondary system. Neither the three-sector structure established after 1988 nor the two-sector architecture created after 1992 owed their origin to a developed view, model or rationale for a system differentiated by sectors.

Likewise, our reading and analysis of documentary sources found little evidence of further and higher education being regarded as part of a common enterprise or, except in the loosest

sense, a single system of tertiary or post-school education. Indeed, how the English combined, connected or separated its post-secondary sectors and institutions was a question posed mainly by scholars, especially transatlantic observers (Trow 1987). Rarely was it an explicit concern for government or its agencies, even when concepts of lifelong learning began to frame the language of official statements and strategies.

It was not until 2001, when the further education sector was replaced by a larger sector under the Learning and Skills Council, that a first – albeit brief – public justification was offered for maintaining a separation between higher education and the rest of the post-compulsory system:

Firstly, uniquely, higher education's contribution is international and national as well as regional and local. Although universities should be responsive to the needs of local employers and business, both to meet skills requirements and in the application of research, they also operate on a wider stage and require a different approach to funding. Second, one of the main aims in creating the new [Learning and Skills] Council is to bring order to an area which is overly complex, and where there are critical issues to address about coherence and the quality of provision. Including higher education would undermine this by complicating significantly the Council's remit and making that remit so broad as to be difficult to manage. (DfEE 1999, 42)

Why this division has attracted more recent attention is because further education colleges have been re-discovered by government as settings for higher education.

Regarded as a residual function in the 1988 and 1992 legislation, and the subject of 'low' or 'no' policy by the sector bodies responsible for further and higher education, the college contribution to undergraduate education was elevated to 'high' policy by the recommendations of the Dearing inquiry into higher education in 1997 (NCIHE 1997; Parry 2003). These proposals, subsequently accepted by government, anticipated a larger role for further education colleges as providers of higher education in their own right. With future growth to be focused on short-cycle vocational higher education and a 50% participation target set for the year 2010, colleges in the further education sector were identified as key partners – along with higher education institutions and employers – in the drive to near-universal access.

Yet, no consistent or coherent policy for dual-sector further and higher education has emerged in the post-Dearing period: either for the 300 or so further education colleges that teach higher education and higher level qualifications (the focus of the Dearing recommendations), or for the 40 or more universities and higher education establishments which support courses of further education (invariably in small pockets but in a few cases accounting for the majority of enrolments). While further education in university settings attracted little official attention, the failure to develop a durable policy for higher education in further education colleges did not go unnoticed, prompting a recent review of the arrangements underpinning this provision (HEFCE 2007).

Over these years, policy has moved and mutated but not in ways that brought clarity or legitimacy to the college contribution. The 'special mission' in sub-degree higher education recommended by Dearing (NCIHE 1997, 260) was transformed into a shared activity with higher education establishments. Put forward to curtail the spread of franchising, the direct funding originally proposed for colleges switched to a preference for indirect funding through 'structured partnerships' with universities. Only a handful of colleges with substantial volumes of higher level work might be treated differently. Indeed, in a later policy turn, it was this band of colleges that were expected to benefit most from the extension of degree awarding powers (for foundation degrees) to further education establishments.

Thus far, there is evidence in our study to associate this lack of policy progress with the differing perspectives and competing interests that arise from sector separation. This division rested on a two-fold assumption: that the boundary between these two levels of work was a matter of some importance; and that provision on either side of this line should be concentrated

in one or the other type of establishment. This was the assumptive base for the legislation that created discrete sectors and equipped sector bodies with remits that allowed for little cross-over in policy debate, exchange and intelligence. That over-arching role lay with government but, given more pressing priorities, dual-sector matters were seldom in the front line of departmental decision-making.

In practice, much of the lead role in evolving and implementing policy was given to the funding council for the higher education sector. The further education funding council neither received nor asked for a larger part in this exercise. Under the Learning and Skills Council, this interest grew, mainly as a result of the rise of the skills agenda, the introduction of foundation degrees and measures to improve vocational progression (such as lifelong learning networks). The development of a joint progression strategy, bringing together both funding bodies and the responsible government department, made for better co-ordination but responsibility for higher education, irrespective of its location, remained the responsibility of one council.

In other words, it was the central authorities for higher education that were able to shape policy and practice for part of the work of institutions in another sector. Individual further education colleges might complain about its effects on their 'delivery' of higher education yet this was frequently the extent of the challenge to issues of policy ownership and leadership. Nowhere was this better illustrated than in the reports of the Dearing and Kennedy inquiries, both published in same year and each in receipt of separate responses from a newly elected Labour government (FEFC 1997; DfEE 1998a, b). Not only did they not communicate with each other on a formal or regular basis, but their boundary marking (Kennedy) and crossing (Dearing) were powerful reminders of the salience of sectors and their unequal relationships.

Whereas the Dearing inquiry felt able to make recommendations aimed at further education colleges, it was the Kennedy committee that, with a brief to look at widening participation, had nothing to say about higher education in its own sector or about further education in the higher education sector. It was also the Dearing committee that chose to examine the division of funding responsibilities between further and higher education in the four countries of the United Kingdom. For England, it rejected the option – accepted for Scotland – that funding for sub-degree higher education in further education should flow through a further education funding body. In arguing for continuity in funding structures and responsibilities, a committee on higher education was confident in making judgements about (and on behalf of) two sectors.

These and other examples in our research point to strong asymmetries in the policy approaches and processes devoted to dual-sector education. Nevertheless, the mixture of avoidance, ambivalence, anxiety and hostility generated by these developments was not limited to the higher education sector and its institutions. Within the funding council itself, there were differences of views about how to manage the college contribution. These ranged from the bureaucratic (the cost in time and effort of dealing with so many small providers) through to the philosophical and ideological (the need to defend or advance an idea of higher education). On some issues, such as just where precisely to set the boundary between further and higher education, financial and territorial considerations were invariably at the heart of the matter.

Organisations in transition

Decisions about boundaries are central to the organisation and management of dual-sector institutions as well. In our reviews of the policy, professional and practitioner literatures on further and higher education, we have been struck by the variety of shapes and forms taken by dual-sector organisations and their directions of change. This is particularly so for colleges in the learning and skills sector where funding routes, volumes and relationships play an important part in how they arrange their further and higher education.

The organisational map is complex. At present, around 140 colleges are funded directly by the Higher Education Funding Council for England for prescribed courses of higher education. A much larger number (around 260) receive funds indirectly, mainly through partnerships with one or more higher education establishments or, for some, through funding consortia. However, only half of these are dependent on indirect funding for their higher education. Others draw on both direct and indirect sources. Colleges receive funding too from the Learning and Skills Council for non-prescribed higher education courses. When validation and quality arrangements are included, together with membership of lifelong learning networks, the picture is more complicated again.

Early in our study, we developed 'ideal-type' characterisations of the range of arrangements and partnerships used by colleges to manage their further and higher education. Here we distinguished between 'contained' and 'permeating' partnerships and between small and large provision that is 'discrete' or 'embedded' within the structure of the college (Parry, Thompson, and Blackie 2006). With respect both to these constructs, and those mapped for dual-sector institutions in higher education, we recognise the need for a more refined set of analytical tools to explore organisational changes and transitions around the dual-sector boundary.

The 'professional bureaucracy' is typically the closest structural configuration to universities, colleges and other professional organisations (Mintzberg 1979). It exemplifies how highly structured organisational fields emerge through the irresistible momentum of bureaucratisation. Yet as markets reach into both further and higher education, operating environments are becoming more unstable and, arguably, less professional. This process would accord with a view found in much organisational theory of a more differentiated world of institutional structures and behaviours.

In contrast, the thesis of organisational isomorphism, building on contributions by Hawley (1968), Hannan and Freeman (1977), Meyer (1979), Fennell (1980) and DiMaggio and Powell (1983), argued that organisational fields are shaped by powerful forces that promote similarities rather than variations in organisational forms and practices. The theory assumed that in the long run organisational actors make rational decisions that construct their organisations in ways that eventually constrain their ability to change further. Isomorphism is addressed to the structural determinants of the range of choices that might be considered rational or prudent. Hence, three forms of isomorphism – coercive (authority driven), mimetic (uncertainty driven) and normative (control driven) – are identified that reflect managerial behaviours 'at the level of taken-for-granted assumptions rather than consciously strategic choices' (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, 149).

While it is important to recognise the play and force of isomorphism, we look at other rationales for the strategic choices taken by those leading dual-sector organisations. These organisations have chosen to embrace the boundary between further and higher education, to bring it inside the organisation and to develop consciously different identities to the rest of the established organisational field. Why have they done this, and how important is widening participation as a goal orientation? Are their structures, cultures and predispositions focused on this goal or are there other goals or rationales behind their strategic choices?

We examine these questions, theoretically and empirically, in terms of boundary understandings and their relationship to organisational behaviours. As an object of theorising, boundaries have tended to be dominated by an economic view based on the notion of exchange efficiency as the principal decision factor (Williamson 1985). The logic is that organisations seek to move boundaries in order to render the maximum governance efficiency possible. However, boundary decisions may be determined by other motives. Santos and Eisenhardt (2005) suggest a framework of four boundary conceptions, adding 'power', 'competence' and 'identity' to efficiency.

In the power conception (Santos and Eisenhardt 2005, 495), boundaries are set in order to maximise control over key external forces. It is about influence in order to reduce uncertainty.

Expansion of the vertical boundaries of the organisation is a way of internalising sources of environmental uncertainty. Changing the position of horizontal boundaries may reduce dependence on single markets. In this concept the assumption is that the organisation will choose to influence its environment, not through ownership mechanisms but through various forms of non-ownership alliances and networks. In this way, the organisation will extend its influence but without extending its legal boundaries.

Viewed from a competence concept, boundary decisions are set at the point at which organisational resources are maximised. These decisions tend to reflect ‘the coevolution of resources with environmental opportunities’ (Santos and Eisenhardt 2005, 498). Market dynamism is a key variable in this conception. Manipulating resources can occur through various forms of partnering arrangements, product development and recoupling of business units. The aim is to add value inside the organisation by moving boundaries in ways that are most optimal for growth.

In the identity conception, the emphasis in boundary setting is on the coherence between identity and activity. Organisational changes – such as mergers, acquisitions, strategic alliances – result in the redefinition and renegotiation of boundaries. Hence boundary decisions are important because they are based on understandings of ‘who we are’ and boundaries ‘perceived as coherent with organizational identity’ (Santos and Eisenhardt 2005, 502). The identity conception can be a source of competitive strength or, if the self-concept of the organisation is ignored, can result in competitive weakness.

Drawing on data derived from 20 interviews with senior organisational leaders at eight dual-sector institutions, we have explored the purchase of this framework of concepts in relation to the boundary choices made in each case:

- A higher education institution with further education merging with a college offering both further education and a significant amount of higher education (Model A)
- A specialist college transferring from the further education sector to the higher education sector (Model B)
- A further education college supporting a small quantity of higher education and maintaining a predominant focus on further education (Model C)
- A further education establishment offering a substantial amount of higher education and separating its organisation of further and higher education (Model D)

Applying boundary concepts is far from straightforward because empirical data are invariably less tidy than conceptual schema. We acknowledge that further analytical development will be necessary to refine and contextualise the picture, particularly with reference to the influence of the drive to widen and deepen participation. Nevertheless, the following accounts consider some of the problematics of organisational transition around the further–higher boundary.

In Model A, the institution is distributed across an area served by several competitor establishments. Faced with strong competitive pressures, decisions were taken to consolidate engagement with both higher education and further education through merger with an institution itself already working across the further–higher boundary. This, it would seem, was a clear case of competence-led decision-making. Moving in a mixed economy direction from an initial higher education base offered the prospect of matching organisational resources with environmental opportunities to gain competitive advantage. However, the competence conception of the higher education portfolio is aligned uneasily with the identity conception of the further education acquisitions.

In Model B, a different history and set of boundary conceptions are in play. Here the coherence of identity around the further–higher boundary is less to do with levels of study than with subject domains and disciplines. This is a specialist institution. Rather than identity, the decision

to re-orientate through transfer from one sector to another involved a clearer set of decisions around the efficiency and competence conception. Nevertheless, identity continued to align with renewed vertical as well as horizontal boundaries.

Further education colleges with limited ambitions for providing higher education, as in Model C, present particular boundary dilemmas. This is a large disaggregated organisation with a strong set of locally rooted further education identities. Adding higher education to its portfolio meant embracing the dual-sector boundary in ways that did not detract from the further education ethos within each of its sites. At the same time, an identity conception is used as a source of competitive strength by offering provision that, wherever possible, distinguished the college from other providers. This provision was also packaged with an enhanced power conception that forged a stronger partnership with a single higher education institution. However, internal boundary reconfiguration has been a powerful organisational influence on the distribution and control of higher education development.

Finally, in Model D, institutional disposition towards the further–higher boundary followed a different path. A long-term deterioration in the ability to reconcile the needs of further education with higher education led to a decision to separate the two. On the face of it, this represented a classic case of a search for efficiency gains by, for example, allowing teaching staff to focus on particular areas. Initially, this was expressed spatially within the college buildings and through a reconfigured set of governance arrangements. Nevertheless, as a mixed economy institution other boundary issues – notably identity – created confusion both internally for staff and students and externally for potential students and stakeholders. In the background were other long-held local and regional aspirations for higher education provision. These influences combined ultimately to justify a more radical vertical disintegration of staffing and structure, with the creation of separate further education and higher education legal entities.

Students in transition

In addition to exemplifying boundary strategies and event histories, these four institutions are our fieldwork sites for studying two other dimensions of further–higher education: how distinctions between further and higher education are represented in such settings; and how they are experienced by students and staff who cross or mediate these boundaries.

In each institution, we interviewed samples of students at each of two points or moments of transition: those moving from further education into higher education; and those transferring from completion of a short-cycle higher education programme, such as a higher national diploma or foundation degree, to a bachelor degree. A total of 200 interviews were conducted with 82 students making one or either of these two points of transition. Interviews were conducted with 45 lecturers, curriculum managers and senior staff whose responsibilities spanned both further and higher education.

One of our aims in the project is to understand the salience and significance of boundary-marking and boundary-crossing, especially for students choosing to remain in the same institution for their higher education. Ahead of a full analysis and synthesis of the fieldwork findings, we limit our discussion to issues that bear directly on policy expectations about further and higher education in dual-sector environments. At the conclusion of the research, a set of project papers on this and other parts of the study will present and review all our findings.

Here we highlight the increasing importance given to ‘progression’ so that students can move within and between institutions and between different kinds of vocational and academic programmes. This has coincided with renewed efforts to bring more young people and adults with vocational qualifications and experience into higher education, first through the introduction of a new work-focused undergraduate qualification (the foundation degree) and second by

bringing together further and higher education institutions across a city, area, region or subject into lifelong learning networks.

The foundation degree is a free-standing qualification but also one designed to function as a transfer qualification. After the equivalent of two years of full-time study, some or most of it frequently undertaken in the workplace, the foundation degree is required to offer 'smooth progression' to the honours degree in the host institution or a partner higher education establishment. By involving employers in their development, by enabling students to apply their learning in specific workplace situations, and by guaranteeing arrangements for progression, the new degree is expected to develop 'the right blend of skills' for working life and 'lay the basis for widening participation and progression' (DfEE 2000, 6).

Lifelong learning networks are established to promote progression into and through higher education and they align with parallel measures to advance vocational and workplace progression. Like foundation degrees, they typically link further education colleges and higher education institutions; and their development costs are supported by significant resources. They too are an important vehicle for future growth, with additional student numbers available to meet increased demand arising from their curriculum development. Nevertheless, their primary aim is to bring 'greater clarity, coherence and certainty' to progression opportunities (HEFCE and LSC 2004, 1).

Along with a policy push for funding cross-sector partnerships, foundation degrees and progression networks has come an acknowledgement that present arrangements might pose 'barriers' to greater integration, especially for dual-sector providers.

As part of making it easier to form sensible partnerships across the further education/higher education boundary, government will remove unnecessary bureaucracy where provision crosses sectors and will provide equity for both providers and learners. We believe that there are unnecessary difficulties for collaboration between higher education and further education presented by the need to respond to the different funding council regimes in relation to planning, funding, and data collection, as well as the difficulties of juggling the requirements of the two quality assurance and inspection arrangements. Different 'mixed economy' institutions and federal arrangements are developing where the traditional boundaries are no longer relevant or desirable. (DfES 2003, 63)

Underpinning these statements is the idea of seamlessness, signalled through calls for stronger articulation, smoother progression and better integration. When further and higher education are combined in a single institution there is a common presumption that, notwithstanding their origins in merger, re-designation or internal development (Garrod and Macfarlane 2007), seamlessness is or should be a major goal of the institution: that its courses of further and higher education are routinely matched; and that its staff and students are attracted by opportunities for internal progression.

Our four case study institutions suggest evidence to the contrary, or rather that rates and patterns of progression vary considerably within and between these examples. Only one of these establishments had seamlessness as a clear strategic goal and it was the only one to brand itself a dual-sector institution. Two of the other case study organisations were keen to exploit the potential for aligning or bridging their further and higher education, one where specialisation created opportunities for vocational and academic forms of progression, and the other where the decision to invest in a strategic alliance with one higher education institution partner encouraged another look at progression. In our fourth case study institution, where its undergraduate education had expanded successfully and purposively over time, progression was often understood and valued in terms of students leaving its further education for other providers of higher education.

At the level of individual programmes, there were examples of long-standing and new types of vocational higher education that made for strong and weak forms of progression. Some higher

diploma and foundation degree courses were highly articulated with programmes above and below these levels, with schools, colleges and universities in partnership to provide a ladder of progression. However, higher level qualifications developed to meet the needs of particular employers and centred on teaching and learning in the workplace offered less scope to connect with other provision, especially for access purposes. In other areas, subject traditions dictated that students moved from foundation studies to selected external specialist institutions. All the same, specific interventions to make transition less daunting and more familiar were common in all but one of our case study institutions (see Bathmaker and Thomas 2007; Goodlad and Thompson 2007).

A second issue has to do with ‘boundaries’ and ‘barriers’ and a tendency in policy discourse and commentary to conflate the two. Dual-sector settings, it is claimed, remove or reduce some of the barriers that non-traditional students would encounter in other – more conventional – contexts for the study of higher education.

FE [further education] is particularly effective in providing HE [higher education] for learners from disadvantaged groups, backgrounds and communities. Many FE colleges offer flexible, local opportunities which make HE accessible to people who might otherwise face significant barriers to participation. The sector is well placed to promote wider participation in HE. (DfES 2006, 30)

While our case studies supply examples of the distinctiveness of higher education in further education colleges, especially the smaller teaching groups in colleges compared to universities and the role of the college teacher in directly supporting the learning of students, we are alert and sensitive to the positive and productive aspects of boundaries, not just their negative consequences.

Some boundaries are about difference, specificity and particularity. For that reason, we have found it useful to distinguish between boundaries that are physical, social and cognitive (see Burns 2007). Physical boundaries can be seen in the use of time and space for different forms of curriculum provision. Social boundaries involve relationships between people which might encourage the development of particular student identities. Cognitive boundaries relate to the ideas, understandings and beliefs that guide the activities of the institution, including the organisation of knowledge into curriculum areas and programme levels.

High integration and strong separation are features associated with two of our case study organisations. In the other two institutions, the marking of spaces is more varied and complicated. While further and higher education might be located in different rooms, floors, buildings and sites, some facilities are still shared, such as library, computing and social areas. In one institution, the history and geography of its sites saw more progression within a campus than between campuses, a reflection of pre-merger relationships and post-merger acquisitions. In many respects, the possibility of creating ‘seamless’ transitions for students appeared no different than attempting to provide ‘smooth’ transitions between institutions.

Moreover, there were conflicting views and expectations about the conduct of teaching and learning across the further and higher levels of study. On the one side, we found examples of additional support for students, such as bridging courses for students moving from further to higher education and from short-cycle courses to bachelor degrees. Again, the length of time to complete to the honours degree was sometimes extended for those using their foundation degree as a transfer qualification.

On the other side, subject tutors responsible for higher education in one establishment were often critical of the supportive structures of teaching and learning in further education, such as open door policies for student support, the extensive use of formative assessment and the availability of numerous assessment opportunities on some vocational pathways: a set of practices (‘spoon feeding’) considered at odds with the demands of higher education and therefore equally inappropriate on courses preparing students for these levels.

Finally, we touch on the question of steering and diversion in the context of dual-sector further and higher education. At the outset, we need to highlight features that are distinctive to these settings: that entry to some higher education courses is operated outside of the national universities and colleges admissions system for full-time undergraduate education, not just because they are part-time but also because they lead to higher-level professional and technical qualifications; and that, given the limited scale and scope of provision of higher education in most further education colleges, there will always be a large majority of students moving out of the college for their undergraduate education.

That said, we found students and their tutors more than aware of the reputational differences that shaped choices and transitions in English higher education. Some lecturers talked about ‘wanting the best’ for their students and that there were better options than staying in the same institution. High-achieving students in particular were often supported and encouraged to look elsewhere for their higher education. Moreover, in one of our institutions the foundation degree is used to ‘stream’ students, much in the same way that the higher diploma served as an entry route for ‘weaker’ students and helped protect the standing and selectivity of the bachelor degree when offered alongside these other awards.

Short-cycle qualifications in dual-sector institutions were regarded implicitly or sometimes explicitly as ‘the choice of the necessary’ (Bourdieu 1984) for those who, for various reasons, were candidates neither for the honours degree nor for the traditional university. However, as in the case of half the number of students completing their foundation degrees (HEFCE 2007) or higher national diplomas (DfEE 2000), progression to the honours degree was also a route taken by students in our case study institutions. Decisions about where to acquire this honours stage were often constrained, leading a number of dual-sector colleges to seek their own ‘top-up’ arrangements rather than relying on transfer agreements with partner universities.

The boundary paradox

If they feature at all in accounts of English higher education, further education colleges occupy one end of an institutional hierarchy that has the most selective research universities positioned at the other. In between, the majority of higher education establishments – the dual-sector universities among them – compete for rank and reputation on the basis of multiple or, for some, specialist missions. As teaching-only institutions without as yet the power to make their own awards, dual-sector further education colleges are reliant on institutions in another sector for the validation or funding of their higher level courses, often both. In these circumstances, duality is associated with dependence and difficulty.

In other respects, dual regimes have been permissive. The boundary between further and higher education has proved permeable and workable, leading to relationships and alliances of many kinds as well as new and changing configurations of further and higher education. On its own, the concept of duality is a limited tool of analysis, especially when applied to organisational fields and to student transitions and identities. At the system and policy levels, it has a greater purchase, mainly due to structures that maintain a boundary between higher education and the rest of the post-secondary system. These arrangements continue, as do strategies for widening participation that look to integration rather than elimination of sector regimes and territories.

Notes

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