The Collegiate and Transfer Functions of Further Education Colleges in the United Kingdom

By Professor Gareth Parry - School of Education, University of Sheffield

In many ways, British further education colleges perform similar collegiate and transfer functions to American community colleges but, unlike their transatlantic counterparts, they stand outside the framework of arrangements established for universities and other higher education institutions. Whereas community colleges are considered part of – even central to – the American higher education system, the further education colleges are administered in a separate sector of post-compulsory education. Not just regarded as different, they are required to provide most of their programmes at levels below that of undergraduate education. Although small amounts of higher education are offered by a majority of colleges, and larger amounts

by a minority, their location in a discrete sector of further education or post-16 learning was intended, among other things, to discourage any upward drift in their mission.

While state-level responsibility for public community colleges has promoted a variety of models, including combined university and community college systems, administrative and then political devolution in the four countries of the United Kingdom has highlighted differences as well as commonalities in their tertiary arrangements. Among the most marked of these differences, both within and between the four jurisdictions, has been the higher education role of further education colleges (Parry, 2005).

In England, about one in nine higher education students are taught in further education settings and most of them concentrated in a minority of colleges. In Scotland, by contrast, around one-quarter of all higher education students are enrolled in further education establishments and nearly all colleges have significant amounts of work at these higher levels. In the much smaller territories of Wales and Northern Ireland, the picture is different again: the Welsh colleges accounting for the smallest proportion of higher education numbers (8%) and those in Northern Ireland closer to the figure for Scotland (20%).

Until recently, there has been little appreciation and insufficient understanding of the nature, scope and significance of these variations. Indeed, a focus on British patterns and trends tended to mask important differences in the way that England and Scotland accomplished the shift from elite to mass scales of participation and, in the Scottish case, how that country achieved levels of near-universal access nearly ten years ahead of those projected for English higher education. These growth patterns and policies are the subject of the second part of the paper where the college contribution to higher education and the character of collegiate and transfer activity in England and Scotland are compared.

Some reference is also made to the situation in Wales and Northern Ireland although, for reasons mainly of size and student mobility, they have less claim to be treated as separate systems. These two countries have large numbers of their population studying elsewhere. In Northern Ireland, this is largely because of the under-supply of places in the province. In Wales, not only did a large proportion of Welsh students register at institutions in England, but Welsh higher education establishments serve very substantial numbers of English students.

The English system is by far the largest, enrolling close to 80% of the student population in its eighty-eight universities, forty-three higher education colleges, and over 300 further education colleges offering courses of higher education. Scottish institutions, on the other hand, recruit around one in seven of the total, and those in Wales (5%) and Northern Ireland (3%) take a smaller share. These proportions hardly change if students studying at a distance with the Open University are included.

Before embarking on 'home international' comparisons (Raffe, 2000), some shared features of further education establishments in the United Kingdom are briefly reviewed. Compared to the higher education and the compulsory education sectors, it is still the case that further education is the least studied part of the education and training system. There are notable scholarly studies on the history and contemporary development of further education but the coverage is generally better for England and Wales (Cantor and Roberts, 1986; Cantor *et al.,* 1995; Ainley and Bailey, 1997; Hyland and Merrill, 2003) and sometimes limited on the role of higher education in further education (Green and Lucas, 1999; Smithers and Robinson, 2000). However, there are now specific studies on the college contribution to higher education in Scotland (Gallacher, 2003) and England (Parry and Thompson, 2002; Parry, Davies and Williams, 2003) as well as those on collaboration between further and higher education (Abramson, Bird and Stennett, 1996).

Further education: shared features and developments

Three major aspects of the past and present development of British further education colleges should be noted, each with a bearing on their capacity to provide higher education and, where necessary, transfer their students to degree-awarding institutions.

Diversification, differentiation and the curriculum

First, although they have their roots in technical and vocational education, the colleges are much more plural in their curriculum than commonly supposed. This is especially the case in England where some 250 establishments are styled general further education colleges and just under 40 are specialist institutions. There are also another 100 or so sixth form colleges that, before their transfer into the English further education sector, were under schools regulations. This set of colleges has a traditional focus on academic education for 16 to 19 olds and they are usually smaller and more selective than the further education colleges.

Following the decline in manufacturing and the collapse of apprenticeships in the 1970s and 1980s, many further education colleges diversified into academic, general, basic and second chance education at the same time as renewing their general and specialist vocational programmes. In expanding their courses leading to upper secondary academic qualifications, they frequently competed with local schools (and sixth form colleges) and often offered a broader range of subjects than school sixth forms. In developing their second chance education they built on a long tradition of open access to adults who used the college as an 'alternative' route to qualify for higher education, to re-enter the labour market, or to change direction.

A number of colleges were also centres for adult education, for professional and continuing education, for basic skills, and for English as a second language. Given this portfolio of programmes, the majority of students were adults who studied mainly part-time. Some who entered straight or soon after leaving secondary school preferred the more adult environment of the college and for many it was an opportunity to improve on their school performance by re-taking examinations or beginning new and different courses of study.

Colleges came to rival schools as settings where young people prepared for higher education but, unlike institutions of secondary education, they also offered vocational qualifications and access courses not available in the compulsory system. Only in respect of academic qualifications – A-levels in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and Highers in Scotland – was there an overlap, although much less so for Highers which remained largely a school-based qualification. Vocational qualifications, including those at the higher levels, were distinctive to further education establishments and frequently provided staged access to higher education within these same colleges or entry to higher education establishments. As a result of the rise of access courses in further education colleges, greater numbers of adults returning to study chose to qualify for higher education through courses specifically designed for older students. Previously, their main option had been part-time A-level courses in the colleges (examinations intended for young people who studied full-time for two years) but, from the 1980s onwards, locally and nationally recognised access programmes became a normal entry route for many 'mature' and 'non-traditional' students.

Dual sectors of further and higher education

A second feature of further education colleges was their public funding and their operation under regulations different from the universities (all but one funded by the state) and the schools (mainly supported by the state but with a significant private sector involvement). The colleges were originally part of a local authority system of further education that included, at one end, the polytechnics and other establishments devoted mainly to 'advanced' (higher education) programmes and, at the other, the great majority of colleges mostly concerned with 'non-advanced' courses. In Scotland, the central institutions (the equivalent to polytechnics) were funded by the Scottish Office while, as elsewhere, the further education colleges came under the local authorities (or the library boards in Northern Ireland). On the other side of the binary line, each of the 'autonomous' universities in the United Kingdom was funded by the Westminster government through a single intermediary body.

At the end of the 1980s, the English polytechnics were removed from local government and, at the beginning of the 1990s, the further education colleges in England and Wales were themselves established as independent corporations funded by central government through a further education funding council in each country. In Scotland, the further education

colleges were also incorporated, receiving their funding initially direct from the Scottish Office and later from their own further education funding council. At the same time, a new unified higher education sector was created in each jurisdiction bringing together the established universities and the former polytechnics and higher education colleges, several of which became new universities. In this way, each country acquired its own higher education funding council and eventually its own further education funding council. Only in Northern Ireland was this not the case.

For the last fifteen years, then, establishments that had further education as their primary goal were treated separately from institutions that had higher education as their central or only purpose. Along with dual sectors of further and higher education came separate and different regimes for allocating public funds, assessing the quality of education, and collecting and publishing statistical information. The small size of the Scottish and Welsh systems allowed for a measure of co-ordination and joint working between the funding councils for each sector, including the use of a joint executive.

This was always more difficult in England, especially after 2000 when a new body –the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) – was established to take responsibility for the strategic development, planning, funding, management and quality assurance of the whole of post-16 learning, excluding higher education. Under this reform, the further education colleges lost their own sector. Henceforth, their provision – along with that of school sixth forms, community education, and government-funded training and workforce development providers – was planned and co-ordinated, area by area, through a network of 47 local LSCs. However, dual sector divisions did little to inhibit the development of a wide variety of collaborative arrangements between institutions in the two sectors, some long-standing and several pioneered by the local authorities.

Collegiate and transfer functions

If by collegiate function is meant the approval of a course or programme for transfer credit to a senior institution (as in the American system), the equivalent in further education would be the recognition of undergraduate qualifications below the level of the bachelors degree (the first degree in British higher education) for transfer into the early, middle or later years of a three or four year degree. The collegiate and transfer functions exercised by British colleges are of a different nature and order to those in the community college system. Not only do general further education colleges, along with sixth form colleges and schools, serve as important access and qualifying environments for students seeking entry to the front-end of undergraduate programmes in universities and other institutions of higher education, but the opportunity to transfer into the later stage of a first degree at these institutions has not, until recent years, been a feature of British arrangements.

The reasons for this are historical and structural. Although the four-year degree in Scotland was less specialist in its admission requirements and curricula, both the Scottish degree and the three-year full-time honours degree in the rest of the United Kingdom have been – traditionally and predominantly – the preserve of establishments of higher education. With no tradition or concept of a general baccalaureate degree (except perhaps in the Open University), and without the modular-credit structures to facilitate student choice, mobility and transfer, the British first degree was a relatively self-contained and linear phenomenon. While the former polytechnics led the move to more modular and flexible curricula, there has been no systematic development of a credit framework within and between the post-secondary sectors. Once again, the central authorities in Scotland and Wales have shown more willingness to begin this process than those in England.

Another consequence of specialist and selective entry to full-time first degree education has been high rates of graduation and a reluctance therefore to consider changes that might undermine the efficiency and effectiveness of the British system. As a result of expansion and competition, many universities are less selective than previously yet government policies aimed at widening participation carry with them an insistence that high rates of completion be maintained. For students not to complete their studies in the minimum expected time is still regarded by the central authorities as a sign of failure on the part of the institution and the student.

Nevertheless, collegiate and transfer functions are now increasingly undertaken by further education colleges. Unlike in American colleges where the collegiate function is associated traditionally (though not exclusively) with the liberal arts curriculum, the higher education programmes offered by further education colleges are, in the main, vocational in orientation. They lead to qualifications, such as the higher national diploma and the higher national certificate, that were once awarded by the business and technical education councils, and today by some of the universities as well. Moreover, for most of their history these higher diplomas and certificates were designed and operated as free-standing qualifications, leading directly to employment or used by employers to train and upgrade their existing workforce. Then, as now, the colleges do not make their own awards, whether at the higher levels or for any other programme they teach.

Given the higher status and higher individual rates of return to first degree qualifications, as well as the growth of strongly vocational programmes at the bachelors level, many of these short-cycle higher diplomas and certificates have since been used as intermediate or transfer qualifications. When offered by higher education institutions themselves, as they still are in England and Wales, they have been integrated into the structure of first degree courses, as exit qualifications for some students and as entry points for those claiming ‘advanced standing’ on the basis of previous qualifications or experience. When offered by further education colleges, they are

probably the closest the British have come to the American transfer function.

Although most higher diploma and certificate students have to transfer to a higher education establishment if they wish to graduate with a first degree, a small number of colleges in England provide internal progression to the bachelors degree in selected specific subjects. In these circumstances, the colleges have to satisfy the validating and awarding university that they can provide research-related teaching at a level comparable to that offered in the final years of a university bachelors degree.

As in the United States, a major issue for further education colleges is the extent to which their higher education courses are aligned to, and accepted by, the universities. Some transfer relationships are the subject of articulation agreements and others might be managed or negotiated on an individual basis. Given the long-standing and continuing role of further education institutions in preparing students – especially adults – for admission to the first year of undergraduate programmes in the universities, articulation agreements are often more common and better developed for this purpose than they are for transfer activity at the higher levels.

In summary, the collegiate and transfer functions of further education colleges involved the movement of students with sub-degree higher education qualifications gained in the colleges sector to first degree programmes in the universities sector. Across the United Kingdom as a whole some 13% of higher education students were taught in further education establishments and an increasing proportion of these sought progression to the first degree, either by 'top-up' arrangements (where available) in the same colleges or, more usually, by transfer to universities. If only undergraduate students are included, and if Open University students are excluded, the proportion of college-based higher education students across the United Kingdom as a whole is 17%, or one in six of the undergraduate population in face-to-face institutions.

Partly because of the different data collection systems in each sector, and partly because of the difficulty in tracking individual students, there is little reliable data on the volume and pattern of students moving from higher national qualifications to the first degree. A government document reporting data for 1997 suggested that 55% of students who completed a higher national diploma in England went on to achieve an honours degree. Just how many of these represented internal progression within the same establishment (which might be a further education college or higher education institution) and how many actually transferred to another establishment was not indicated (Department for Education and Employment, 2000). The same source calculated that 29% of those completing the two-year diploma began their degree course in year two and 50% started in year one.

Progression and transfer rates were also likely to vary in relation to the scale, shape and significance of the college contribution in the different parts of the United Kingdom. In the remainder of this paper, the college

contribution made, first, to the shift to mass higher education and, second, to the drive to near-universal access is compared between the four countries of the United Kingdom. On the basis of this evidence, two models of collegiate and transfer activity can be identified, one associated with new policy directions in England (and Wales) and the other reflecting a more settled path of development in Scotland.

Mass higher education: growth trajectories and the college contribution

In the short period between the end of the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s, British higher education underwent a dramatic expansion, with the age participation rate for young people in full-time undergraduate education doubling to over 30% and the size of student population increasing by more than half. Both the suddenness and the pace of expansion took most observers by surprise. In quantitative terms, if rather less in its values, British higher education moved from an extended elite to a mass system. What was intended as a modest increase in numbers to help counter a demographic downturn in the school-leaver population became the basis for unprecedented levels of growth. Buoyant demand combined with funding policies designed to lower the unit of resource produced a wave of 'efficient expansion' that required neither the creation of new or alternative institutions nor the reform of the traditional entry and exit qualifications for higher education.

Underneath this expansion were country variations in the levels and patterns of growth. Rates of increase were considerably higher in Wales and England, where total student numbers rose by 56% and 47% respectively, and lower in Scotland and Northern Ireland, where both rose by under 40%. At the beginning of the expansion period, Scotland and Northern Ireland had participation levels in excess of 20% and, in this sense, were already on the threshold of mass scales of higher education. By the end of the growth phase, participation levels in Scotland were still 25% higher than in England, with Northern Ireland and Wales located between the two. Although its increase was greater than for other territories, England was the only country not to have passed the 30% mark by 1993.

In all four countries, institutions in the (then) non-university sector of higher education (including those becoming universities after 1992) grew faster than the established universities. However, the gap between these two sets of higher education establishments was smaller in Scotland, mainly because it was the further education colleges that secured the most rapid growth in higher education enrolments (a feature it shared with Northern Ireland). By contrast, the further education sector in England was a source of much slower growth and, in Wales, the numbers of college-based enrolments actually declined.

In the two largest systems, therefore, the college contribution to the shift to mass higher education was significantly different, even divergent. In Scotland, it was the further education colleges that took the bulk

of expansion. Its one-year higher national certificate and its two-year higher national diploma courses, available part-time and full-time, accounted for the great majority of this higher education contribution. These programmes were offered within a Scottish framework of vocational qualifications and, in the tradition of local authority further education, they were funded (and continued to be regarded) as 'advanced' further education. In this way, the colleges were able to assume major responsibility for a level and category of work that was offered less and less by the central institutions. Moreover, support for this growth continued under the Scottish Office after 1992 when it took over funding responsibility for the colleges from the local authorities.

When, in response to a looming financial crisis, full-time undergraduate expansion in all parts of the United Kingdom was brought to a halt in 1994, Scotland had more than a quarter of its higher education students in the further education sector. All the same, this was only a slight increase in the college proportion found at the start of the expansion era. What has been described as two parallel systems of higher education in Scotland (Gallacher, 2002) was not a product of the passage to mass higher education. Rather, it was a means by which that country was able to achieve a relatively smooth transition to mass conditions and, at the same time, maintain its lead (with Northern Ireland) in higher levels of participation in the United Kingdom. That advanced further education courses were funded at a lower average level of resource than the early years of a four-year degree programme in Scottish higher education establishments was just one factor sustaining the college contribution to higher education at these levels.

This discrete mission for higher education in further education at the sub-degree levels is evident in the not inconsiderable amounts of advanced work found in most colleges. Most of this provision is part-time, continuing a long and well-established pattern of students studying while in employment. Nevertheless, more recent growth has seen a new focus on full-time courses at the higher national levels. As a result of these twin trends, the majority of new undergraduate level entrants to Scottish higher education now commence their studies in further education settings.

As in all regions of the United Kingdom, the opportunity to study in a locally accessible college is particularly important in providing a route back into education for adult students, both at the stage of initial entry to further education and then into higher level programmes. Scottish further education colleges do not just bring an older range of students into undergraduate studies than other face-to-face establishments. There is evidence as well that, compared to the higher education sector, they have been successful in attracting a much higher percentage of students from disadvantaged areas (Raab, 1998). Participation rates in the colleges for those from the most disadvantaged areas were about twice as high as those in the higher education sector and, in the Scottish system at least, the further education colleges appeared to have a key role in widening access to higher education.

Except in relation to the franchising of undergraduate courses to further education establishments, the college contribution to the great expansion of higher education in England was secondary. Its role was auxiliary and ancillary. Neither their history of engagement with higher level work, nor their costs, nor their flexibility and accessibility, were able to compete with a pattern of demand that reproduced and reinforced the hegemony of the honours degree in the English system. In this country, most of the surge in growth was focused on the first degree and was taken by the higher education institutions.

Among the latter, it was the polytechnic numbers that expanded the fastest (by more than two-thirds during the expansion years). The rate of increase among the established universities was half this figure (at 37%) and among the further education colleges – where growth was slowest – it was 23%. In any other context, the level of growth in further education would have been exceptional but the effect of spectacular expansion elsewhere was to reduce the college proportion of higher education enrolments.

It was only the introduction of franchising, always a minor phenomenon in Scotland, that prevented an overall reduction in the college contribution to English higher education. Franchising involved a higher education establishment sub-contracting the teaching of some of its undergraduate programmes (in whole or part) to one or more further education colleges. The fastest expanding polytechnics were in the van of this development, especially when capacity limits had been reached in taking additional students into their own buildings and campuses.

Colleges were also keen to enter into franchise arrangements. It brought new income streams into the college and the status attached to higher level work was attractive to many teaching staff. It provided avenues of progression for its students, especially those unable or unwilling to attend a higher education institution outside their locality or region. Franchising also brought some colleges into higher education for the first time as well as diversifying the levels and subjects of undergraduate study taught in further education settings.

Like the growth to which it gave rise, franchising was neither planned nor regulated by the sector bodies and it attracted concern in some quarters that quality and standards were being compromised. It coincided as well with the creation in 1992 of a new further education sector. Part of the rationale for this reform in England was to relieve further education colleges of the burden of higher education (seen as the proper responsibility of universities and polytechnics) and so enable them to focus more clearly on their core mission (at the upper secondary and associated tertiary levels). Indeed, the new further education funding council operated a policy of 'no policy' in respect of the higher education it inherited from the previous local authority system and which it was obliged to continue to fund.

Near-universal access: two models of collegiate and transfer activity

As a result of these growth trajectories and features, England lurched to mass higher education without the colleges being viewed or treated as central to this transition (Parry, 2003). In Scotland, quasi-markets were also used by the state to sponsor expansion at a lower unit of resource yet the outcome here was a clear division of academic labour between provision of first degree and postgraduate education (in the higher education sector) and sub-degree vocational higher education (in the further education sector). Higher education in the Scottish colleges was funded directly for this purpose. Many of the colleges that offered higher education in England did so on the basis of both direct and indirect (franchise) funding and this contributed to a mix of levels, types and parts of undergraduate qualifications taught in further education, including the first degree.

When the national committee of inquiry into higher education (the Dearing inquiry, 1996-97) examined these matters, it was impressed with the participation levels achieved in Scotland and recommended that renewed growth in England should be concentrated at the sub-degree levels. More significantly, but equally controversially, it proposed that the majority of this expansion should be located in further education colleges. More than that, these colleges should be funded directly for this 'special mission' and, to prevent any erosion or drift in this mission, no growth should be allowed in first degree and postgraduate education in the further education sector. Franchise relationships were viewed with considerable disquiet by the inquiry and the new quality assurance body for higher education was asked to regulate and contain their development.

This attempt to give English colleges a distinct role in higher education was recommended by a committee of inquiry into higher education, not further education. It was yet another example of policy and purpose being made for further education by an external body or party, in this case the higher education sector. Such was the strong division between the higher and further education sectors in the English system that the recommendation occasioned little public response from the colleges. Among the 50 or so colleges that accounted for over half of the higher education numbers in further education, there was some dismay that their aspirations to provide courses to the first degree might be checked. The other college providers, where higher education frequently represented small pockets of activity and where some of this was funded indirectly, were equally concerned about curbs on franchising.

Whatever the source of their concerns, there was no active or collective engagement by the colleges with the Dearing proposals. More often it was the ambivalence or hostility of higher education establishments or agencies that commanded more attention. However, it must be remembered that most colleges were clear that their core mission lay elsewhere and, compared to the huge number of enrolments at the further

education levels, higher education students were but a tiny fraction of the student population in the sector. When published, it was other recommendations in the inquiry report that were to dominate public debate in the post-Dearing years.

In retrospect, the main political purpose of the Dearing inquiry (which received bipartisan support from the governing and opposition parties) was to make the 'breakthrough' on the introduction of fees for full-time undergraduate courses (including those in further education colleges). Adopting a different model than that recommended by the inquiry, the new Labour government required an up-front flat-rate private contribution to the costs of all first degree and sub-degree programmes. At the same time, the Blair administration implemented a manifesto pledge to establish, following referendums in each country, a parliament in Scotland and national assemblies in Wales and Northern Ireland. One of the first actions of the Scottish parliament was to reject the English approach to fees and to devise its own deferred payment scheme.

Given that political devolution highlighted and reinforced trends toward greater differentiation between the four countries, it was during the second Blair government that it became possible to conceive of two models of collegiate and transfer activity in the English and Scottish systems. Troubled by damp demand for existing sub-degree qualifications and by some critical quality assessment reports on higher education in a minority of colleges, the Westminster government embarked on major policy experiment designed to change ('break') the traditional pattern of demand for English higher education.

Firstly, a new two-year work-focused qualification – the foundation degree – was invented to enhance the standing of vocational sub-degree higher education and, over time, to replace previous qualifications at this level. This was the first new major higher education qualification to be introduced since the diploma of higher education in the 1970s. Secondly, a target of 50% of the 18 to 30 age group in higher education was identified to lead the drive to widening participation, to close the 'skills gap' at the intermediate levels and to achieve near-universal access by the year 2010. Reflecting its skills agenda and a somewhat low-trust relationship with further education, the government looked to colleges to 'deliver' this qualification in association with employers and the universities.

Contrary to the Dearing recommendations, the main instrument for this delivery function was to be indirect funding, either in franchised arrangements or through recognised funding consortia. In what the government described as a 'structured partnership', employers would contribute to the design and operation of the new qualification, colleges would teach much of the programme, and universities would award the short-cycle 'degree'. As in past and present franchise relationships, the universities awarded additional funded places for foundation degrees would need to 'top-slice' these funds to cover the costs of their quality assurance and other

services. The remainder would be passed to the colleges to teach these programmes. Currently, the proportion retained the franchising university ranges from 5% to 50%, with most partnerships reporting between 20% and 40% (Parry *et al*., 2003).

Thirdly, the undergraduate fee regime introduced by the first Blair government was partially de-regulated. From 2006, higher education providers were allowed to charge up to three times the previous flat-rate fee and, unlike the earlier scheme, students were able to begin to pay this when in employment. Unsurprisingly, the ruling coalition in Scotland announced its opposition to these 'top-up' fees. Equally, it saw no reason to adopt foundation degrees. The Welsh assembly also gave a commitment not to introduce variable fees during the life of the present administration. On the other hand, policy borrowing in the form of foundation degrees proceeded apace.

So, in conclusion, two models of college-based undergraduate education and transfer can be discerned, each with their own dilemmas of access, progression and 'employability'. In England, there has been continuing ambivalence about the role of higher education in further education as well as an unresolved ambiguity about the purpose of the foundation degree. Is it primarily an exit qualification leading to entry or re-entry to the labour market? Or, is it a transfer qualification enabling students from a wide range of social and economic backgrounds to achieve the first degree qualification? Or, should and can it be both?

As a new qualification, the foundation degree has yet to prove itself one way or the other. Moreover, most of the public debate and media interest in access issues in England has been preoccupied with the placement of 'bright' working class young people in some of the leading research-intensive universities. In Scotland, where the higher national diplomas and certificates will be retained (and revised) and where higher education numbers will be held at present levels, the access problem is more immediately a transfer or progression question. More than a third of full-time higher national students in Scotland progress to further study, including the first degree, but these routes are often limited and spread unevenly between the new and old universities (Osborne *et al.,* 2002).

If, as at present, attrition is greater at the sub-degree levels and the number of those transferring into higher education institutions is less than desired, there is the prospect of many adult and working class students finding their opportunities reduced or delayed in an increasingly stratified pattern of Scottish higher education. There is a risk as well that, if 'widening participation students' become the main audience for the foundation degree, then England might follow Scotland in allowing two relatively disconnected systems to conceal new patterns of inequality in 'a new learning divide' (Morgan-Klein, 2000).

Retention and transfer are likely to figure large in the work of the new merged funding council for further and higher education planned in Scotland. No such reform is contemplated in England, at least not ahead

of the conclusions of an independent review of further education colleges (the Foster review, 2004-05). This review was prompted by worries about the mission and identity of general further education colleges. In one set of policies, they were asked to play a leading role in the delivery of foundation degrees. In another set of policies, these same institutions were urged to make special provision for individuals as young as fourteen and fifteen years of age who would undertake studies in college as part of their secondary school curriculum. A third set of policies insisted that such colleges cultivate a specialist vocational focus and make that central to their mission.

Arguably, these were not conditions that favoured the development of secure and sustainable higher education in the college sector. In England, further education colleges had yet to be widely regarded or accepted as normal and necessary settings for undergraduate education.

This paper was presented at the Annual Conference of the Council for the Study of Community Colleges, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, 8-9 April 2005.

References

Abramson, M., Bird, J. and Stennett, A. (eds.) (1996) Further and Higher Education Partnerships. The Future of Collaboration, Buckingham, Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Ainley, P. and Bailey, B. (1997) The Business of Learning: Staff and Student Experiences of Further Education in the 1990s, London, Cassell.

Cantor, L. M. and Roberts, I. F. (1986) Further Education Today: A Critical Review, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Cantor, L., Roberts, I. and Pratley, B. (1995) A Guide to Further Education in England and Wales, London, Cassell.

Department for Education and Employment (2000) Foundation degrees. Consultation paper, London, DfEE.

Gallacher, J. (2002) 'Parallel lines? Higher education in Scotland's colleges and higher education institutions', Scottish Affairs, 40, pp. 123-139.

Gallacher, J. (2003) Higher Education in Further Education Colleges: the Scottish Experience, London, Council for Industry and Higher Education.

Green, A. and Lucas, N. (eds.) (1999) FE and Lifelong Learning: Realigning the Sector for the Twenty-first Century, London, Institute of Education University of London.

Hyland, T. and Merrill, B. (2003) The Changing Face of Further Education, London, RoutledgeFalmer.

Morgan-Klein, B. (2000) 'Scottish higher education and the FE-HE nexus', Higher Education Quarterly, 57 (4), pp. 338-354.

Osborne, M., Gallacher, J. and Murphy, M. (2002) A Research Review of FE/HE Links. Report to Scottish Executive, Stirling, Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning.

Parry, G. (2005) 'British higher education and the prism of devolution', in T. Tapper and D. Palfreyman (eds.) Understanding Mass Higher Education. Comparative Perspectives on Access, Abingdon, RoutledgeFalmer, pp. 160-189.

Parry, G. (2003) 'Mass higher education and the English: wherein the colleges?', Higher Education Quarterly, 57 (4), pp. 308-337.

Parry, G. and Thompson, A. (2002) Closer by degrees: the past, present and future of higher education in further education colleges, London, Learning and Skills Development Agency.

Parry, G., Davies, P. and Williams, J. (2003) Dimensions of difference: higher education in the Learning and skills sector, London, Learning and Skills Development Agency.

Parry, G., Moseley, R., Thompson, J. and Blackie, P. (2003) Review of Indirect Funding Agreements and Arrangements between Higher Education Institutions and Further Education Colleges, Issues Paper 2003/57, Bristol, Higher Education Funding Council for England.

Raab, G. (1998) Participation in Higher Education in Scotland, Edinburgh, Scottish Higher Education Funding Council.

Raffe, D. (2000) 'Investigating the education systems of the United Kingdom', in D. Phillips (ed.) The Education Systems of the United Kingdom, Wallingford, Symposium Books, pp. 9-28.

Smithers, A. and Robinson, P. (eds.) (2000) Further Education Re-formed, London, Falmer Press.

About the author

Professor Gareth Parry works in the School of Education at the University of Sheffield. His research and teaching interests are in higher education policy and change, access and participation, system and organisation, and international tertiary education. He has published widely in these areas. In addition he is a Fellow of the Society for Research into Higher Education and a Director of the ESRC Study 'Universal Access and Dual Regimes of Further and Higher Education'.