

Policy-Participation Trajectories in English Higher Education

Gareth Parry, University of Sheffield

Abstract

The pattern of expansion that brought mass characteristics to English higher education is very different from that intended to achieve near-universal access by the end of the present decade. The spectacular growth of the late 1980s and early 1990s was neither projected nor planned, with important consequences for the shape of the English system. By contrast, the policies of renewed expansion and widening participation from the late 1990s represent a radical attempt to change the traditional pattern of demand for English undergraduate education, with future growth focused on the short-cycle forms of vocational higher education. Although influenced by the example of Scotland in building expansion at levels below the first degree, the policy experiment pursued in England is highly distinctive, including the invention of a new undergraduate qualification and a partnership role for further education colleges.

Two policy-participation trajectories

The way that English higher education acquired its mass dimensions has a major bearing on present efforts to renew expansion and broaden the social base of undergraduate education. Only a short interval, the years of consolidation occasioned by a crisis of funding, separated the breakthrough to mass levels of participation at the beginning of the 1990s and the subsequent drive to engage half the relevant age group in higher education by the end of the following decade. Despite their proximity, the relationship between these two growth periods and their attendant policies is infrequently addressed or debated.

A shortening of the policy memory, within and beyond the government, is just one of the explanations for this inattention. Departmental strategies and delivery targets might give better direction to public policy but, arguably, they leave less room for reflection on past experiences. On

the other hand, the more recent this experience, the more difficult it is to acquire perspective and insight. Nor is closeness in time any guarantee that the span of national statistical information will make for easy comparison. While the statistical base for policy making in England is stronger than in many other countries, it is still the case that data coverage, linkage and quality is often uneven, especially across the post-secondary system.

For academic and policy workers alike, a more obvious factor inhibiting or delaying such comparison is that the second of these growth periods is unfinished. In policy terms, the original timetable for this phase extended to 2010, at which point participation in English higher education was intended to encompass 50 per cent of those aged 18–30. Whether approached or achieved by that year, there is no necessary presumption that participation should be held at that level or that growth should cease. In short, there is as yet no closure around this current phase to match that of the earlier period.

Notwithstanding the unfolding and uncertain future of this phase, it is reasonable to begin an examination of some of the key characteristics of each episode. Indeed, an understanding of the pattern of mass expansion encountered by the English system will illuminate the continuities and discontinuities in the subsequent movement to near-universal access. To avoid imposing a linear regularity on events that are neither uniform nor straightforward (Scott, 1995), the concept of policy-participation trajectory is used to capture and compare the main contours of each growth period.

Policy turn: the shift mass levels of participation

The shift from an elite, or extended elite, system of higher education to one that enrolled more than a quarter of the relevant age grade was accomplished at a scale and pace that was unanticipated by most observers. In the space of just 7 years, between 1988 and 1994, the participation rate for young people doubled from 15 to around 30 per cent, and the number of higher education students in the English system increased by more than half. It was also a largely unplanned episode, with the abolition of the binary system and the introduction of unified quality assurance arrangements following rather than leading the expansion.

Throughout this period, no serious attempt was made to shape or steer the pattern of demand. Nor were the central authorities much concerned to coordinate or manage the consequences of the explosion in numbers. No major reform of the traditional entry and exit qualifications

was required to stimulate this growth. No new or alternative institutions were created to take this expansion. Buoyant demand from young people and adults on the one side, and the supply of additional places at a decreasing unit of resource on the other, combined to produce a more crowded environment for undergraduate education; and not just in the fastest-expanding institutions and subjects.

The modest amount of expansion initially permitted by the government amounted to a reversal of previous official policy (Department for Education and Science, 1985, 1987). Rather than allowing a demographic reduction in the size of the school-leaver population to justify further retrenchment, a widening of access to higher education was accepted as basis for encouraging recruitment to shortage and strategic areas, particularly science, technology and business. Such was the strength of demand expressed for higher education in general, and the growing success of competitive funding policies in securing 'efficient expansion', that planned numbers were met several years in advance of official projections. The exponential growth set in motion by this policy turn eventually came to an end in 1994 when the spiralling costs of student support led to a capping of places in full-time undergraduate education.

The purpose of this abbreviated and over-simplified account is to sketch the background for some of the distinctive patterns and trends that marked the English passage, or rather lurch, to mass higher education. A comparison of policy-participation trajectories between the four countries of the United Kingdom – particularly in Scotland – will serve to highlight these features (Parry, 2005a). At this time, policy differences between the four jurisdictions were less obviously marked than following political devolution at the end of the 1990s. However, historical, cultural and organisational differences were always important, as in the 4-year degree system in Scotland. Indeed, the administrative devolution was long standing and paved the way for the establishment of separate higher education funding councils in England, Scotland and Wales after 1993.

Three dimensions of difference and distinctiveness are identified, each with implications for how mass higher education was encountered, accommodated and evolved in the English case.

Rates of expansion and the polytechnic contribution

When England began its dramatic expansion, participation rates in Scotland and Northern Ireland were already in excess of 20 per cent – the generally recognised threshold for mass higher education. The partici-

pation gap between England and these two countries was maintained throughout the growth period, but total student numbers grew much faster in England and Wales than in Scotland and Northern Ireland (Table 1).

It was the polytechnics, newly removed from the control of the local authorities and immediately responsive to the quasi-market mechanisms introduced at this time, which led the English expansion. The rate of growth in the universities was lower, yet considerably more than in the further education sector, which was the slowest part of the system to grow. This was in contrast to Scotland, where the further education colleges took a much larger share of the new enrolments and where numbers grew slightly faster than the central institutions and much faster than the universities.

The vanguard role of the polytechnics in English expansion reflected their access traditions, as promoted and planned by the local authorities, and the determination of these institutions to rival the position of the universities. Although incorporated as independent institutions with their own funding council, the polytechnics were able to build on the variety of links and relationships with further education that had been fostered under local authority control.

Access courses preparing adults for higher education were a prominent example of such collaboration. Much of the rapid growth of these courses during the 1980s was a result of the sponsorship of some of the large metropolitan authorities, as part of the wider equal opportunities policies targeted at those who had benefited least from their previous education. Programmes that guaranteed places on undergraduate courses for students successfully completing their access studies were probably the closest the higher education system came to in terms of affirmative or positive action.

These and other alternative entry schemes were initially discouraged by the central government and, in some cases, branded a threat to academic standards. Following its revised policy on access at the end of the 1980s, access courses were recognised as one of three main entry routes into higher education, alongside A-level examinations and equivalent vocational qualifications. Together with an assurance that future arrangements for student financial support (such as loans) would take account of the importance of maintaining access by students from all social and economic backgrounds, this was the extent of national policy on widening participation for most of this period.

How individual institutions operated their admission arrangements and adapted their curriculum structures to attract a larger and broader

TABLE 1
Higher education students by country and type of institution
(excluding Open University), 1989/1990–1993/1994 (Thousands)

	1989/1990	1993/1994
England		
Higher education institutions		
Universities Funding Council (UFC) and former UFC	299.0	409.3 (+37%)
Polytechnic and Universities Funding Council (PCFC) and former PCFC	389.4	634.9 (+63%)
Total	688.4	1,044.2 (+52%)
Further education colleges	119.2	146.4 (+23%)
All institutions	807.6	1,190.6 (+47%)
Scotland		
Higher education institutions		
UFC and former UFC	52.4	68.0 (+30%)
Scottish Education Department (SED) and former SED	46.1	64.5 (+40%)
Total	98.5	132.5 (+35%)
Further education colleges	33.1	47.3 (+43%)
All institutions	131.6	179.7 (+37%)
Wales		
Higher education institutions		
UFC and former UFC	24.6	36.4 (+48%)
Wales Advisory Body for Local Authority Higher Education (WAB) and former WAB	21.0	36.1 (+72%)
Total	45.6	72.5 (+59%)
Further education colleges	1.6	1.1 (-31%)
All institutions	47.2	73.6 (+56%)
Northern Ireland		
Higher education institutions	23.8	32.6 (+37%)
Further education colleges	3.4	5.1 (+50%)
All institutions	27.3	37.7 (+38%)
United Kingdom		
Higher education institutions	856.3	1,281.8 (+50%)
Further education colleges	157.3	199.9 (+27%)
All institutions	1,013.7	1,481.6 (+46%)

Sources: Further Education Statistical Record, Scottish Office, Universities Statistical Record, Welsh Office.

Notes: Figures for franchise students were not collected for these years. Figures for SED and former SED institutions include colleges of education. Percentage of change in brackets.

mix of students remained their own responsibility. For the polytechnics and the higher education colleges, widening participation was a key element in the mission of their new funding council, as it was under the national advisory body for local authority higher education. When the university and non-university sectors of higher education were abolished, a similar commitment was inherited by the new single funding council for England.

New students and the dominance of the first degree

While expansion brought students with a wider range of backgrounds, achievements and experiences into English higher education, especially adults holding non-traditional qualifications, the primary focus of this new demand was the full-time first degree offered by establishments of higher education. Again, this was different from Scotland, where the large number of students undertaking their higher education in further education were nearly all studying, full-time and part-time, for higher national qualifications.

Since the 1970s, a policy of concentration in local authority higher education had been pursued by successive governments, with the strongest establishments expected to command an increasing proportion of the full-time and higher-level work (Sharp, 1987). For their part, the local authorities sought to defend a dispersal of higher education. Equally, they were proud of the achievement of their own polytechnics and major colleges in expanding their full-time degree and postgraduate provision. By the middle of the 1980s, these establishments had overtaken the universities in the number of students entering full-time courses leading to the first degree.

When it came, the move to mass higher education in England was centred on modes, levels and institutions that resembled its prior phase of development. Moreover, in the course of this transition, both the power to award degrees and the title of university were extended to each of the polytechnics. In reviewing the significance of these continuities and changes, rather less attention has been given to the impact of demand-led growth on the shape of English higher education. At the point of take-off to mass expansion, just over half of the student population were studying for the first degree, nearly a third were found on sub-degree courses and the rest were enrolled on postgraduate programmes (Table 2). Over the next 5 years, the number of first degree students grew by 60 per cent while studying at the other undergraduate levels increased by only 17 per cent. As a result, the proportion of

TABLE 2
Higher education students by qualification aim (excluding Open University) in England, 1989–1993
 (Thousands)

	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993
Postgraduate	118.9 (15%)	133.2 (15%)	153.6 (16%)	174.2 (16%)	194.4 (16%)
First degree	443.8 (55%)	488.2 (56%)	554.2 (57%)	633.6 (58%)	710.4 (60%)
Other undergraduate	244.9 (30%)	251.8 (29%)	264.3 (27%)	275.6 (25%)	285.7 (24%)
Total	807.6 (100%)	873.2 (100%)	972.1 (100%)	1,083.4 (100%)	1,190.5 (100%)

Sources: Further Education Statistical Record, Universities Statistical Record.

Notes: Includes students registered at higher education institutions and taught in further education colleges. Figures for franchise students were not collected for these years. Percentage at each qualification level in brackets.

sub-degree students fell to less than a quarter, while those registered for the first degree had climbed to three in five of all students. Over this period, then, the percentage gap between these two qualification levels widened substantially. At the postgraduate levels, where the share of students remained broadly the same, the rate of increase was the largest of all at 63 per cent.

The popularity of the first degree applied to part-time as well as full-time students, although the latter far outnumbered the former. The slower expansion at the sub-degree levels was strongest for full-time courses which, unlike at the first degree, were a small minority of the other undergraduate provision. The sharp growth in postgraduate numbers was found in both modes, yet it is much greater for part-time studies. The parity in full-time and part-time postgraduate education at the beginning of this phase had given way to a clear part-time majority (Parry, 2005b).

When publicly funded expansion was brought to an abrupt end in 1994, not only had English higher education acquired a somewhat different balance of qualification levels and modes of study, it also lessened the role of further education colleges as providers of higher education in their right. In Scotland, where such institutions enrolled around a quarter of the higher education population and where the great majority of sub-degree courses were located, the importance of the access and short-cycle contributions of college-based higher education was reinforced and celebrated.

In Northern Ireland, always something of a special case, the proportion of higher education in further education expanded considerably during the growth years. In England and Wales, on the other hand, the college share of higher education registrations declined. Acceptance by government of a need to increase provision of 2-year full-time diploma courses came too late to influence this situation (Department of Education and Science, 1991a).

Capacity constraints and the rise of franchising

The extent of this decline, or whether it amounted to a decreased contribution at all, was affected by another distinctive feature of the English (and Welsh) passage to mass higher education. This was the rise of franchising: the sub-contracting of the teaching of all or part of undergraduate courses (and occasionally postgraduate programmes) from a higher education institution to another provider, usually a further education college. In these transactions, some of the funding

received for each student was retained by the higher education establishment and the remainder was passed to the college to perform the teaching function.

Given their leading role in expansion, together with their existing access relationships with further education colleges, it was mainly the polytechnics and rarely the universities that entered into franchise arrangements. For the higher education institutions, franchising was a means of reaching and recruiting new groups of students, especially those local to the colleges teaching these programmes. Among the fastest-expanding polytechnics and higher education establishments, it was also a means of reconciling the imperative to expand and the capacity of their buildings and campuses to absorb more students.

There were advantages as well for the collaborating colleges (Department of Education and Science, 1991b). In addition to the alternative income streams available to the college and the higher status attached to undergraduate teaching, there was an opportunity to offer progression to higher education within the college and, where necessary, with transfer to the partner higher education institution. Franchising brought new subjects and qualifications (including more at the first-degree level) into college-based higher education. At the same time, as the number of directly funded higher education students was declining, franchise agreements brought some colleges into higher education for the first time.

Franchising was just one of a number of forms of collaboration between institutions in the two sectors, and some polytechnics and colleges had pioneered these relationships over many years. Nevertheless, the number and type of franchise schemes increased rapidly during the years of major expansion, and their arrangements became ever more varied (Abramson, Bird and Stennett, 1996). Just before the capping of full-time undergraduate places, it was estimated that over 30,000 higher education students were taught on franchised or collaborative programmes in English further education (HEFCE, 1995).

By adding the franchise total to the population of students on higher education offered by colleges in their own name, then something approaching one in seven (15 per cent) of all higher education students in England (excluding the Open University) were located in establishments of further education for some or all of their teaching. This was the same proportion as at the beginning of the expansion phase and, if accepted, would suggest that the college share of higher education was maintained. However, data on franchise students were not collected at this time and the reliability of some estimates is in question (Parry and Thompson, 2002).

The unregulated environment for franchising raised concerns in some quarters, but no attempt was made to curb its development. It was not uncommon for colleges to have franchise arrangements with more than one higher education institution and, at the height of expansion, some individual polytechnics operated franchises with over 20 further education establishments. Franchise activity in Wales was not the widespread phenomenon it became in England. Unlike the multiple and assorted forms taken in England, its adoption was planned and controlled by the funding body for Welsh higher education (Griffiths, 2003).

In Scotland, the funding of higher education in further education went directly to the colleges and the higher-level qualifications they offered were the responsibility of a separate and single body for vocational education and training. In contrast to England, there was no involvement by higher education establishments in the validation or quality assurance of these programmes, and examples of franchising were few and far between (Gallacher, 2006).

The spread of indirect funding into college-based higher education in England, along with the uneven, unplanned and unstable character of overall expansion, were to have important consequences for how growth was to be renewed in pursuit of a more globally competitive and socially inclusive higher education.

Policy push: the drive to near-universal access

If strong demand, free tuition, grant support and a declining unit of resource were the features of the shift to mass participation, the context for the next phase was target-led growth, mission differentiation, strategic intervention and an increasing private contribution to the costs of full-time undergraduate education. The platform for this second growth phase was the report of the Dearing inquiry into higher education and the acceptance of its recommendations on increased and widened participation by the newly elected Blair Government in 1997. Bipartisan support for the setting up of the inquiry was a response to the financial crisis that had deepened rather than abated during the consolidation years.

The Thatcher and Major Governments could properly claim to have made higher education a popular undertaking but, as the Dearing report made plain, disparities in participation remained, both between groups – especially by social class – and from different groups in different types of institutions (National Committee of Inquiry, 1997). Under successive Blair administrations – and to an extent not demonstrated previously –

measures to widen participation, strengthen progression and improve retention have been at the forefront of national policies for higher education. These have been a common set of priorities for the Scottish parliament and Welsh assembly as well. On the basis of access and equity considerations, both countries have nevertheless refused to follow or allow English reform of student fees (and financial support) to dictate their policy agendas.

In England, policies aimed at growth and widening participation in higher education are implicated in strategies for skills, employer engagement and further education. These have evolved in stages, with later interventions representing radical attempts to change the supply and demand for English undergraduate education. In seeking to stimulate and steer demand on the one side, and alter the shape and social base of higher education on the other, the English have embarked on a major policy experiment. In so doing, they confront features that were reproduced and reinforced by the previous pattern of expansion as well as those obscured or displaced by this experience.

Renewed growth, widening participation and the college contribution

Although not based on the depth of evidence and analysis applied to funding, the Dearing recommendations that resumed growth should be focused at the sub-degree levels and that further education colleges should be accorded a prominent role in future expansion still stand as core components of current policy. Both marked a break with earlier assumptions and both took most observers by surprise.

Aware that recruitment to sub-degree higher education had been a major factor in the higher participation levels achieved in Scotland, and persuaded that short-cycle qualifications were appropriate to lifelong learning, the inquiry report expected a major part of future growth to be expressed at levels below the first degree. Such courses offered greater flexibility for individuals to enter and exit the system. In addition, they were seen as well suited to many of the new students entering this expanded system, large numbers of whom were likely to have non-standard entry qualifications and diverse aspirations.

Rather less appreciation was indicated of the policy history of English further education. When the polytechnics and higher education colleges were incorporated as free-standing institutions after 1989, the further education colleges remained within the local authority system. While a number of colleges continued to offer varying amounts of higher education, the removal of funding responsibility for higher education from

the local authorities (except for part-time higher national certificate courses) was seen as unburdening the sector and returning its primary mission. Similarly, when the colleges themselves were incorporated after 1993, higher education was neither a subject of policy nor strategy within the new further education funding council.

More controversial again were three other linked proposals: that priority in future growth at the sub-degree levels should be accorded to further education colleges; that there was no case for expanding degree or postgraduate work in further education institutions; and that colleges should be funded directly for their 'special mission' in sub-degree higher education. Here again, the example of Scotland (reported by a separate Scottish committee inside the Dearing inquiry) would seem to have been influential. That Scottish further education colleges held a near monopoly of higher national qualifications and avoided an upward drift were reasons enough, perhaps for the English, to accept a similar academic division of labour.

The argument for direct funding had a more English flavour. The Dearing report reserved some of its most prescriptive judgements for a limitation on multiple and serial forms of franchising. There was a worry that some colleges might be extending themselves too broadly and entering into too many relationships to be able to ensure quality and standards. For such arrangements to continue, the report stated, there needed to be rigorous criteria specifying the 'proper limits' of franchising and a regulatory framework to ensure 'compliance' with these requirements. In discharging this role, the newly formed Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education was encouraged to limit colleges to one partner higher education institution.

One of these three proposals has survived intact. Damp demand for sub-degree programmes and an early concern about low subject review ratings in some colleges quickly cooled any enthusiasm for limiting expansion institutions in the further education sector. Because the majority of sub-degree programmes in England were located in the higher education sector, there was little prospect of provision moving in the direction of colleges, even if demand for courses in these settings was to increase significantly. Nor were colleges ready to deny themselves and their students the chance to undertake degree-level work, especially if this provided a 'top-up' to their short-cycle programmes.

In the event, no restrictions were imposed on the number of franchise partners linked to a further education college and, more than that, the higher education funding council offered colleges a choice between direct and indirect funding options. If they wished, colleges were able to

continue with multiple funding routes. The plural funding approach, together with codes of practice on indirect funding partnerships, was introduced in 2000.

Fifty per cent and the foundation degree

With little evidence of improved demand in the post-Dearing years, ministers came to doubt the fitness and attractiveness of existing sub-degree qualifications to deliver further significant expansion. In order to stimulate demand and serve as the engine for future expansion, the Blair Government announced the introduction of a new 2-year qualification, described initially as an associate degree but finally designated as a foundation degree. In parallel with this venture, and just as contentious, the government committed itself to a participation target of 50 per cent of 18–30 year olds entering higher education by the year 2010.

The radical nature of these two interventions was a measure of the seriousness of a policy project aimed at widening access, increasing participation, maintaining standards and, now, transforming vocational higher education. The foundation degree was the first major new higher education qualification to be introduced in the English system since the diploma of higher education in the 1970s. It was also the first time that a short-cycle qualification carried the title of ‘degree’, rather than diploma or certificate.

In turn, the 50 per cent target introduced a new measure of participation into higher education and signalled a far-reaching commitment. Consistent with the Dearing proposal to ask colleges to take a central role in the delivery of future growth, these twin measures marked the second and fullest expression of the policy push to concentrate growth in the first and early cycles of undergraduate education.

The 50 per cent target had its origin in the New Labour manifesto for the 2001 general election but, more importantly, it has been translated into a public sector agreement target set by the Treasury for the Department for Education and Skills. At the time of the election, Scotland was already on the point of recording 50 per cent of young people undertaking some kind of higher education by the time they were aged 21. Only for use in England, the target would require a steeper curve of expansion than the 45 per cent participation rate for young people thought achievable by the Dearing inquiry over the next 20 years. The origins of the target lay in the labour market forecasts for graduate-level skills, but its significance for widening participation was the strong

likelihood that achieving this level would simultaneously improve the social mix of students (Newby, 2005).

In large part, the foundation degree was created to build demand for a different style of higher education and so achieve most of the expansion to meet this target. By involving employers in its design and operation, and by enabling students to apply their learning to specific workplace situations, the new degree was intended to raise the value of work-focused higher education and, over time, subsume many of the other qualifications at these levels. It would thereby redress the historic 'skills deficit' at the intermediate levels of the economy and, awarded by higher education institutions, it would guarantee arrangements for progression to the first degree. To promote its accessibility, the new qualification was to be delivered 'typically' by further education colleges (Department for Education and Employment, 2000). Since their introduction as prototypes in 2000/2001, recruitment to foundation degrees reached 38,000 in 2004/2005 and was expected to rise to 47,000 in the following year (Longhurst, 2005). Slightly more than half were studying full-time and roughly similar numbers were taught in higher education institutions as in further education colleges. The majority of the latter were registered with a partner higher education establishment and they accounted for an increasing proportion of the franchise and collaboratively taught students in further education colleges during the second and current growth period. A preference for indirect over direct forms of funding for higher education in further education has resulted in more growth in franchise numbers than in students registered and owned by the colleges (Table 3).

Compared with the rampant expansion of the late 1980s and early 1990s, the overall rates of increase were much lower for all levels of qualification and for both higher education institutions and further education colleges. As intended, growth at the first-degree level has reduced and was brought closer to that achieved at the other undergraduate levels. Expansion in postgraduate numbers was, as before, faster than for other levels.

One effect of stronger growth at the postgraduate levels has been to increase its share of all enrolments. Comparisons between the previous and present growth phases were more difficult at the other qualification levels mainly because of changes in data collection systems, definitions and categories. Institutional mergers and transfers between the further and higher education sectors also needed to be taken into account as well as the impact of franchising and the trend for more sub-degree students to complete their studies at the first degree. Notwithstanding these

TABLE 3

Higher education students by type of institution (excluding Open University) and qualification aim in England, 2000/2001–2004/2005 (Thousands)

	2000/2001	2004/2005
Higher education institutions		
Postgraduate	359.1	429.1 (+19%)
First degree	823.5	929.7 (+13%)
Other undergraduate	328.6	364.1 (+11%)
Total	1,511.2	1,722.9 (+14%)
Further education colleges	129.4	141.4 (+9%)
All institutions	1,640.6	1,864.3 (+14%)
Students registered at higher education institutions and taught at further education colleges	36.2	51.0 (+41%)

Sources: Department for Education and Skills, Higher Education Funding Council for England, Higher Education Statistics Agency.

Notes: Counts across the entire reporting year. Franchise figures do not form a time series because the underlying populations used have changed between years. Percentage of change in brackets.

cautions and hazards, there was evidence of an improvement in the share of sub-degree enrolments at the beginning of the current period and then a drop to levels below that recorded during the earlier growth phase (Table 4).

In attempting this comparison, assumptions had to be made about the proportion of higher education students registered at different qualification levels in the further education sector. Located in this sector were a significant number of professional, technical and vocational courses leading to higher-level qualifications. Such courses might be classified for some purposes as higher education and for others might not. Such issues throw into relief the complexities of participation and progression under mass conditions and the blurring and questioning of boundaries that once framed an elite system.

As with the example of franchising, not only did it take time for data collection systems to capture and report on new developments, the statistical information eventually produced might still not form a reliable time series. What might therefore appear as a simple task, such as reporting the amount and type of higher education undertaken in further education colleges, could generate some highly misleading descriptions. For the current phase, an estimated one in nine higher

TABLE 4
Higher education students at higher education institutions (excluding Open University) and further education colleges in England, 2000/2001–2004/2005 (Thousands)

	2000/2001	2001/2002	2002/2003	2003/2004	2004/2005
Higher education institutions					
Postgraduate	359.1 (24%)	375.8 (24%)	399.6 (24%)	421.6 (25%)	429.1 (25%)
First degree	823.5 (54%)	847.7 (54%)	883.0 (54%)	992.3 (58%)	1,014.7 (59%)
Other undergraduate	328.6 (22%)	347.5 (22%)	366.3 (22%)	285.3 (17%)	279.1 (16%)
Total	1,511.2 (100%)	1,571.0 (100%)	1,648.9 (100%)	1,699.2 (100%)	1,722.9 (100%)
Further education colleges	129.4	139.7	135.0	143.1	141.4
All institutions	1,640.6	1,710.7	1,783.9	1,842.3	1,864.3
Students registered at higher education institutions and taught in further education colleges	36.2	40.4	43.1	44.6	51.0

Sources: Department for Education and Skills, Higher Education Funding Council for England, Higher Education Statistics Agency.
Notes: Counts across the entire reporting year. Franchise figures do not form a time series because the underlying populations used have changed between years. Percentage at each qualification level in brackets.

TABLE 5

Higher education students taught at higher education institutions (excluding Open University) and further education colleges by qualification aim in England, 2001/2002 (Thousands)

	2001/2002
Higher education institutions	
Postgraduate	372.2 (24%)
First degree	837.9 (55%)
Other undergraduate	320.4 (21%)
Total	1,530.5 (100%)
Further education colleges	
Postgraduate	7.3 (4%)
First degree	25.6 (14%)
Other undergraduate	147.3 (82%)
Total	180.2 (100%)
All institutions	1,710.7
Percentage of higher education students taught in further education colleges	11%

Sources: Department for Education and Skills, Higher Education Funding Council for England, Higher Education Statistics Agency.

Notes: Counts across the entire reporting year. Percentage at each qualification level in brackets.

education students in England received their teaching in further education establishments (Table 5), compared with 28 per cent in Scotland, 22 per cent in Northern Ireland and just 9 per cent in Wales (Parry, 2005c).

Competition and semi-compulsory partnerships

A third and latest stage in the policy project for English higher education saw foundation degrees positioned to 'break' the traditional pattern of demand (Department for Education and Skills, 2003). Alongside the introduction of variable fees, the reintroduction of grants and the removal of research degree-awarding powers as a requirement to become a university, the employer-focused foundation degree was declared the standard 2-year qualification and recognised as an end in its own right.

Given a more competitive market for higher education it was necessary therefore to 'incentivise' both the supply of, and demand for, foundation degrees: by offering additional funded places for these programmes in preference to traditional honours degree courses; by holding steady the numbers studying 3-year degrees; by providing devel-

opment funding for institutions and employers to work together in designing new courses; and, if required, by making available bursaries to be used either for extra maintenance or to offset the fee for the programme. In these ways, growth would come predominantly through this new route.

At the same time, 'structured partnerships' between colleges and universities – franchise or consortium arrangements with colleges funded through partner higher education institutions – would be the primary vehicles for further education colleges to deliver higher education. Opportunities for colleges themselves to bid for additional funded places would be limited to 'niche' provision or where there were no obvious higher education partners. In practice, more flexibility was allowed to colleges and a review announced of the financial arrangements (direct and indirect) that underpin higher education courses in further education.

Throughout his period, the application of market-based approaches to higher education has been accompanied by specific efforts to promote cooperation and collaboration, especially with further education. Partnerships with colleges and schools were an important element in the widening participation strategies recommended by the Dearing inquiry and the outreach programmes sponsored by the government and the funding bodies. Collaboration with employers, sector skills councils and regional development agencies, and that between colleges and universities, have become semi-compulsory requirements of a number of funding policies, including the allocation of additional student numbers.

Lifelong learning networks represent the latest and possibly largest initiative to forge cross-sector collaboration on an area-, regional- or city-wide basis (HEFCE and LSC, 2004). Part of a wider strategy to advance vocational and workplace progression into and through higher education, the networks were expected to combine the strengths of diverse institutions and bring greater clarity, coherence and certainty to progression opportunities for vocational students. With an eye to the 50 per cent target, they sought to increase the proportion of students entering higher education from vocational learning programmes. Only 40–50 per cent of those qualified for entry took this path, compared with about 90 per cent of students on conventional A-level programmes.

Such differences were long standing but the problem was likely to be exacerbated by the introduction of variable fees. As competition intensified, there was a concern that research-intensive universities might withdraw from the limited progression arrangements they cur-

rently operated. By bringing these universities into membership in life-long learning networks, these networks could then 'reconnect the sector' and enable students to move between different kinds of vocational and academic programmes as their lifetime needs, interests and abilities develop.

This and other interventions were of an order and magnitude hardly anticipated at the beginning of this phase. They were largely absent during the freewheeling expansion of the previous period.

2010 and after

In recent years, the possibility of achieving a 50 per cent level of participation by 2010 has receded, with official statements referring instead to moving towards this target by the end of the decade. After that date, for reasons of demography alone, the number of young school-leavers will reduce substantially and rapidly until the end of the next decade. However, the decline in the young population will be concentrated in those social groups who participate least in higher education, so the effect on student demand will be much less severe than would otherwise be the case (Bekhradnia, 2006).

Ahead of this downturn, the government will review the impact of its variable fees policy on participation in general and on access for working-class students in particular. In the meantime, another spell of turbulence can be expected, with competition between universities waged less on the fee level and more on the bursary offered to students. Foundation degrees will continue to be the major area of expansion and other work-based higher education programmes will also be expanded. While foundation degrees have benefited from incentives on the supply side to secure their growth, those on the demand side have not been implemented.

Policies directed at higher and further education have, as one of their primary objectives, the greater differentiation of the post-secondary system by sector, provider, programme and qualification. In higher education, measures directed at differentiation and diversification included many of those associated with the drive to participation rates up to and beyond the 50 per cent level. While the government would continue to be the main source of funding for teaching, research and knowledge transfer, in the future institutions would have 'greater freedom' to access new funding sources on their own account.

In further education, differentiation policies have just been as powerful and pervasive. As a result of the creation of the learning and skills

sector, a combination of competition, collaboration and inspection was intended to produce a clearer differentiation between colleges. In urging colleges to play to their particular strengths, specialisation was seen as paramount. Now, nearly all general further education colleges have at least one vocational specialism for which they were regarded as a centre of excellence locally, regionally or nationally.

Increased differentiation would also be sought in the higher education role of colleges. Previously, no attempt was made to prevent colleges from offering higher education programmes, even those with small pockets of activity. Hereon, only those delivering 'to the right standard' would be allowed to continue with work at this level. Among those continuing with higher education as part of their mission, some would be designated centres of higher education excellence (Department for Education and Skills, 2006). Equipped with a strong occupational and employment purpose, their main priority as higher education providers in the new decade would be employability as much as widening participation.

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.
- Bekhradnia, B. (2006) *Demand For Higher Education to 2020*. HEPI Report Summary 22. Oxford: Higher Education Policy Institute.
- Department for Education and Employment (2000) *Foundation Degrees*. Consultation Paper. London: DfEE.
- Department for Education and Skills (2003) *The Future of Higher Education*. Cm 5735. London: The Stationery Office.
- Department for Education and Skills (2006) *Further Education. Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances*. Cm 6768. London: The Stationery Office.
- Department of Education and Science (1985) *The Development of Higher Education into the 1990s*. Cmnd 9524. London: HMSO.
- Department of Education and Science (1987) *Higher Education. Meeting the Challenge*. Cm 114. London: HMSO.
- Department of Education and Science (1991a) *Higher Education. A New Framework*. Cm 1541. London: HMSO.
- Department of Education and Science (1991b) *Higher Education in Further Education Colleges. Franchising and Other Forms of Collaboration with Polytechnics. A report by HM Inspectors, 228/91*. London: DES.
- Gallacher, J. (2006) Blurring the Boundaries or Creating Diversity? The Contribution of the Further Education Colleges to Higher Education in Scotland. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 30 (1), pp. 43–58.
- Griffiths, M. (2003) Policy-Practice Proximity: the Scope for College-Based Higher Education and Cross-Sector Collaboration in Wales. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 57 (4), pp. 355–375.
- Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (1995) *Higher Education in Further Education Colleges. the Funding Relationship*. Bristol: HEFCE.

- Higher Education Funding Council for England and Learning and Skills Council (HEFCE and LSC) (2004) *Lifelong Learning Networks*. Joint letter from HEFCE and the Learning and Skills Council, HEFCE Circular Letter, 12/2004. Bristol: HEFCE.
- Longhurst, D. (2005) Are Foundation Degrees Designed for Widening Participation? Is the Foundation Degree a Turtle or a Fruit Fly? In C. Duke and G. Layer (eds.), *Widening Participation. Which Way Forward for English Higher Education?* Leicester: NIACE, pp. 45–59.
- National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (1997) *Higher Education in the Learning Society Main Report*. London: NCIHE.
- Newby, H. (2005) Doing widening participation: Social Inequality and Access to Higher Education. In G. Layer (ed.), *Closing the Equity Gap. The Impact of Widening Participation Strategies in the UK and the USA*. Leicester: NIACE, pp. 1–21.
- Parry, G. (2005a) 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. (2005b) English Higher Education and Near Universal Access: the College Contribution. In G. Layer (ed.), *Closing the Equity Gap. The Impact of Widening Participation Strategies in the UK and the USA*. Leicester: NIACE, pp. 81–123.
- Parry, G. (2005c) Why the English are different? In C. Duke (ed.), *The Tertiary Moment. What Road to Inclusive Higher Education?* Leicester: NIACE, pp. 117–132.
- 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.
- Scott, P. (1995) *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education*. Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.
- Sharp, P. R. (1987) *The Creation of the Local Authority Sector of Higher Education*. Lewes: Falmer Press.