



**Universal Access and Dual Regimes of Further and Higher  
Education  
(The FurtherHigher Project)**

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**WORKING PAPER 4  
ORGANISATIONAL STUDIES**

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# **Universal Access and Dual Regimes of Further and Higher Education**

## **(The FurtherHigher Project)**

### **Our working papers**

This is one of a series of working papers reporting the methods, findings and implications of a study of *Universal Access and Dual Regimes of Further and Higher Education* (The FurtherHigher Project). Each is authored by one or more individuals on behalf of the project team. The working papers, along with copies of presentations and publications, can be downloaded from the project website at [www.sheffield.ac.uk/furtherhigher](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/furtherhigher)

### **Our project**

The research was one of seven projects on widening participation in higher education funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) through its Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP). Information about each study, including Research Briefings on our own and other projects, can be accessed at [www.tlrp.org](http://www.tlrp.org) The FurtherHigher Project was based at the University of Sheffield and undertaken between February 2006 and July 2008.

### **Our objective**

We investigated the influence of a division between further and higher education on strategies to widen participation in English undergraduate education. Such a division was intended to concentrate higher education in one sector and further education in another sector, each with their own institutions and separate funding and regulatory bodies. However, government policy in recent years has looked to expand higher education in the further education sector. We examined whether sector separation advanced or inhibited a broadening of participation.

### **Our approach**

We looked at policy and practice at three levels. At the system level, policy interviews and statistical studies were combined with international and contextual commentaries. At the institutional level, we employed case studies to develop a typology of further-higher organisational forms. At the level of courses and students, detailed fieldwork was carried out in four partner further-higher establishments to elucidate features of progression.

### **Our project team**

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# **Organisational Studies in the FurtherHigher Project**

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## **Aims and background**

The research reported in this working paper examines the organisational configurations and rationales of those institutions that work across English further and higher education. It analyses the interrelations between the continued division of English tertiary education into two separate sectors, the changing configurations and orientations of institutions to the boundary between them and the implications for widening participation strategies.

The paper focuses on the idea of dual regimes of further and higher education as a terrain of transition and transfer in an institutional sense. The central issue is how organisations perceive the ‘potential for permeability’ (Bocock and Scott 1995) across the boundary FE and HE and how being a mixed economy or dual sector institution influences organisational and management models. Hence, this part of the project contributes an institutional or meso-level dimension to understanding how duality is expressed, encountered and experienced in terms of the configuration and management of provision, its history and development, and the strategic questions that govern its present and future direction. These issues are important, for two reasons.

First, at policy level, governments across the world are interested in questions about institutional frameworks and their impact on diversity in higher educational systems. Diversity is usually perceived as a positive policy outcome on the basis that it opens higher education to a wider cross-section of society by increasing student choice and participation (Huisman 2007: 563). In English policy ‘official’ recognition of the significance of diversity can be traced back to the Robbins Report of 1963, where it was noted: The system must provide varied education of high quality, both to satisfy national needs and to fit young people to take their place in an increasingly complex social and economic structure’ (Committee on Higher Education 1963).

In the context of the present study such thinking is exemplified more recently in the Foster Review of the distinctive contribution of Further Education Colleges (FECs) to delivering across a range of demands, including higher education strategies, and the HEFCE’s policy of ascribing a special mission to the Colleges in providing sub-Honours degree level vocational and work-related programmes (Foster 2005; HEFCE

2006a; 2006b). It has also resurfaced subsequently in the UK Government's White Paper Innovation Nation (DIUS 2008) which sets out ideas for how FECs might work more closely with employers to deliver specialist research, consultancy and support for product development, process improvement and business incubation (DIUS 2008 para 7.7). It seems not unreasonable to ask, therefore, whether and how dual sector institutions have any particular purchase on the expansion, differentiation and diversification of English higher education. Although there is an expectation that such institutions will make a major contribution to widening participation and near-universal access to higher education, at issue is their capacity to perform this role within a two-sector system.

The second reason is more theoretically informed, but no less important, in striving to make sense of the complex organisational map of further and higher education. Until recently studies of mass higher education have tended to overlook the formation, functions and structures of non-university institutions, particularly those that embrace elements of sector duality within their missions. This neglect apparently ignores Trow's (1970; 1974) important observation that one of the features of a mass higher education system is the emergence of institutions capable of absorbing the additional students brought into the system and thus protecting "elite higher education" from becoming like higher education for the masses' (Teichler 2008: 5).

Rather than a process of substitution of elite higher education by mass higher education, therefore, additional segments of higher education have emerged through the process of expansion. Leaving aside the mechanics of this process, the important point concerns the particular characteristics and contribution of the non-university sector. At issue in the English context are not just variations between different types of elite or mass universities, but the core differences between universities firmly entrenched in the higher education sector, on the one hand, and those 'other' types of institutions that encounter dualism because they straddle both the further and higher education sectors, on the other.

To be clear, the distinguishing characteristic of English dual and mixed economy institutions is that they provide various forms and quantities of higher education whilst remaining committed also to study in the further education sector funded by the

Learning and Skills Council. For some time they have been recognised as serving local and employer needs through courses closely aligned to the world of work, helping part-time, mature and geographically isolated students, widening participation among under-represented students and easing progression from further to higher education (HEFCE 1995).

Whilst these dimensions of being 'dual sector' are relatively well established the organisational implications are less clear and under-theorised. At issue is the significance of being dual-sector. Hence, the present study seeks to develop a better understanding of different types of dual-sector organisations together with their partnerships and networks. Through detailed analysis of this organisational element of being dual-sector it seeks to establish a substantive evidence-informed understanding of the structural, situational and dispositional factors that influence the development of dual and mixed economy institutions and their contribution to participation, progression and transfer in a dual-sector system. This necessitates a step back from policy merely as text in order to portray and understand how those responsible for giving meaning to widening participation goals might rationalise and configure their organisations.

### **Methodological approach**

The organisational studies comprise a series of institutional case studies of varying degrees of intensity and depth. The aim was to examine and explain in a selection of case study sites patterns of transition and configurations around the dual sector boundary and to locate widening participation strategies within this organisational mix. The primary data source is derived from a series of in-depth interviews with institutional leaders.

A view from the senior leadership tier was felt to offer the most appropriate lens on meso-level developments for several reasons. Organizational leaders play key roles in determining boundaries and their significance. Boundary setting and management is a potentially powerful influence on how a field is perceived and the organisation

configured in relation to the field.<sup>1</sup> A focus on boundary setting processes is also justified because it helps illuminate organizational strategies for exerting control and counter-control within the field (Morgan 1997: 182). It is a facet of the broader leadership tasks of shaping the institution's character and purpose, defending its institutional integrity, winning and maintaining consent and ordering internal conflict (Selznick 1957: 62-63).

It was assumed for our purposes that corporate actors are in fact real people who make real decisions and carry them out. Hence we have sought the views of both chief and second tier executives in the case site institutions visited. The interviews explored their own accounts of why their institution engaged in both FE and HE, how these encounters are rationalised and organized and with what consequences in terms of operating across the terrain of two separate sectors. Supplemented by documentary analysis and other policy data, the interviews focused on how those with intimate acquaintance with events sought to rationalise and configure organizational life in order to achieve their goals.<sup>2</sup>

The idea behind the interviews was that they should provide data to help develop a critical examination of the influence of being a mixed-economy institution on organisational and management models – to include an exploration of how arrangements are integrated as well as their spatial configurations. In each institution visited particular attention was paid to the following themes:

- The rationales for making organisational transitions across the dual-sector boundary
- The strategic considerations behind becoming (and maintaining or changing) dual-sector status
- The challenges are posed by being involved in both FE and HE in terms of integration, governance and management

<sup>1</sup> Though we recognise that from Bourdieu's perspective position-takings also reflect a 'quasi-mechanical' element that occurs semi-independently of agents-actors in the field (Bourdieu 1993: 59).

<sup>2</sup> To maintain the anonymity of institutions and individual respondents in the reporting process we have used fictitious institutional names and standardised job titles. The latter are condensed into: (i) Principal, to reflect Chief Executive Officer (CEO) titles, including Acting and Interim Principals; (ii)

- The success factors that enhance activity in relation to widening participation, including obstacles and challenges
- Recent trends and future directions for dual or mixed economy institutions.

These themes formed the basis of semi-structured interviews in 11 case study sites. These sites included the four participating English institutions which were also the subject of in-depth longitudinal studies of students and staff (see working paper 5) and one Australian dual sector university. The additional case sites were selected from the population of dual sector institutions combining further education with varying quantities and configurations of higher education provision.<sup>3</sup>

### **Duality and institutional hybridity: problems and formulations**

The organisational studies were designed to explore the significance of duality within the institutional field of further and higher education.<sup>4</sup> The two separate further and higher education sectors as constructed and maintained in the English system represent formalised fields that over time have become institutionalised. One hypothesis that flows from this is that dual sector or mixed economy institutions are not inherently different or distinctive to other types of institutions in their home fields. They are either FE or HE institutions (usually the former of course) that choose, for a variety of reasons, to provide courses located in the adjacent sector.<sup>5</sup>

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Vice-Principal and equivalent second-tier leadership roles, including Directors responsible for specific areas of institutional strategy; (iii) HE Manager, to indicate the most senior HE specific role.

<sup>3</sup> The methodology for selecting these participating dual-sector institutions is recounted in an annex to this paper.

<sup>4</sup> We have explored aspects of institutional identity using the concept of 'field' as advanced by Bourdieu (1997; 1998) in a previous working paper (Bathmaker 2007). Whereas Bourdieu likens fields to markets and also games, the present analysis adopts a conceptualisation of field derived from a neo-institutionalist perspective. From this perspective 'field' is something that aggregates to a 'recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organisations that produce similar services and products' (DiMaggio and Powell 1983: 143). This institutional view of field is an important facet of how the environment of dual sector organisations might be conceptualised.

<sup>5</sup> Although sectors continue to define institutions in the English context, they are themselves being stretched in new directions. For example, some Colleges in the FE sector, including several that feature as case studies in this project, are also providing for 14-16 year students located in the schools sector (who remain on school rolls).

An alternative hypothesis is that by operating across the funding and administrative boundaries institutions become in some sense ‘dual-sector’. Rather than being either an FE or an HE institution the illuminating concept of duality is somewhat different. It rejects the (somewhat pejorative) idea that the organisation inhabits the FE/HE margins and replaces it instead with a concept of becoming in some sense dual-sector or ‘hybrid’. This hypothesis implies that dual sector institutions do not operate in separate sectors but are, in effect, mediating in the creation of a new or hybridised field of further and higher education (FHE).<sup>6</sup>

Conventionally of course further and higher education are conceived as separate fields, each marked by their own set of institutional and governance arrangements, regulatory rules and norms and cultural understandings. Moreover, in conventional conceptions the fields are typically presented as hierarchical: HE above FE, university institutions over non-university institutions in terms of status and prestige. Hence the relationship between the two sectors is often analysed in terms of providing a sorting service – whether as ‘transfer’ (enabling the ablest to have a second chance and progress to higher levels of study elsewhere in the elite part of the system) (Brint and Karabel 1989), ‘cooling out’ (Clark 1961; Valdez 1996), ‘class reproduction’ (Dougherty 1987) or ‘democratisation’ functions (Rouse 1995).

The significance of having hybrid institutions, arguably, is that by creating a hybrid zone of FHE the institution in effect ‘imports’ these sorting and other functions of ‘duality’ from the external environment and institutionalises them within its internal organisational arrangements. The notions of seamlessness and seamless progression become touchstones of the hybrid organisation. Rather than being part of the external institutional environment associated with the external landscape of separate further and higher education regimes, diversity and differentiation in effect becomes part of the internal organisational fabric of the institution. Organisational arrangements have to accommodate the resulting tensions and contradictions of function, identity, practice and culture.

<sup>6</sup> The theoretical dimensions of hybridity in relation to dual sector organisations are discussed extensively in the paper: Gourley, W. (2008) Wicked problems, hybrid organisations and ‘clumsy institutions’ at the Further Education and Higher Education (FE/HE) interface.

Duality certainly poses significant challenges for the leaders and academics in institutions that attempt to span the boundaries of further and higher education (FHE). As Garrod and Macfarlane (2006) have argued, one of the principal themes of duality is the extent to which such boundary spanning entities 'seek to integrate further and higher education processes, structures and resources within a single organisation.' They suggest a structural continuum stretching from organisations characterised as 'Unitary/Seamless', at one extreme, to those closer to 'Binary/Joined' at the other. Hence, the notion of 'duality' appears as a defining characteristic even though the primary objectives, rationales, structures and cultures of each institution may vary considerably.

Although the concept of 'duality' seems helpful in explaining patterns of differentiation among dual or mixed economy institutions the present research indicates the need for better tools with which to investigate how hybrid or dual-sector institutions configure and explain themselves. Indeed the problem inherent in the concept of duality is that it conveys the impression that there is something distinctive about being dual-sector. Yet those institutions that embrace duality are located for governance, administrative and funding reasons within a home base that continues to be defined as either FE or HE. In the English context at least, it is not clear what being dual sector represents other than signal or symbol of cross-boundary engagement precisely because sector identity remains in place almost as part of the genetic code of the institution. Nothing distinctive in an organisational sense is likely to emerge, arguably, because the tie to the home field ensures the pressure to converge around the dominant model and because the features of an effective cross-sector system of further and higher education remain unclear. Indeed these features remain almost part of a 'hidden curriculum' of dual-sector organisational life. Although the institution may be tempted into extending its reach into the adjacent field the conventional view is that it does so mainly through devices such as partnerships, consortia and various other coalitions which, by their nature, are at a distance, possibly sub-contracted and invariably temporary. Since that part of the organisation, both structurally and culturally, handling these arrangements remains part of the secret garden of institutional life it is not clear what or how duality contributes to differentiation and diversification of the system.

A somewhat different perspective can be detected in the earlier work of Bocoock and Scott (1995) where it was suggested that while the duality imposed by different funding and administrative requirements is important, such requirements were actually secondary to the goal orientation of FHE partnerships. Indeed, they argued forcefully that had duality, as defined solely by administrative and funding, been paramount, then FHE partnerships would have declined in importance. That they were (and are) so resilient is testament largely not just to their relevance in achieving their goals, but to the ‘potential for permeability’ (Bocoock and Scott 1995: 103) of the boundary that forms the interface between separate FE and HE sectors.

Approaches to FHE provision have of course evolved considerably since the period of ‘no’ or ‘low’ policy during the 1990s (Parry and Thompson 2002). Whereas the tendency then was to conceptualise provision primarily in terms of franchise ‘schemes’ and other contractual ‘partnerships’, more recently the focus of attention has switched to the institutionalisation of collaborative arrangements inside dual sector organisations (see Robinson et al 2006; and Silver 2008, for recent studies of partnerships). Whilst the benefits of working with HEIs through various forms of mediated or indirect funding relationships are acknowledged inside the FE sector, many colleges have also expressed a preference for direct funding of their HE provision and not a little concern at the lack of genuine partnership with their HE collaborators (HEFCE 2003). Although many FHE partnerships based on sub-contractual relationships (typically but not exclusively franchising) remain robust, there has been a discernible move towards direct funding relationships with the HEFCE. One of the effects, arguably, has been to ‘import’ duality into institutional structures and create a need for a clearer understanding of how the interface between the sectors is being internalised. By shedding new light on these internal processes the aim is to develop a better understanding of institutions and the related puzzles of duality and diversity.

However, before embarking on the account it is necessary to strike an additional note of caution about the slipperiness of the term diversity. Although there have been some distinguished studies of diversity within the higher education literature there

remains considerable division about the processes of diversification or differentiation that lie behind it.

In a penetrating analysis, Kogan (1997) argued that while specialisation was ‘the basis of diversification’ it also exhibited several different dimensions that can each pull in different directions. It was evident that universities of all kinds were broadening their offerings, and hence diversity, but the paradox was that this would narrow differences between them ‘as the more esteemed try to enter the market for saleable courses, and the least esteemed attempt to strengthen their academic standing by moving more determinedly into the traditional academic fields’ (Kogan 1997: 49).

This paradox is also discussed by Teichler (2008) who notes that despite government policies across several European systems designed to create and preserve different types of higher education institutions, a fairly universal response among the non-university institutions has been attempts to raise their status and become more similar to the universities (Teichler 2008: 7). Such universal tendencies would appear to reinforce another conclusion arising out of the existing range of empirical studies of system diversity and differentiation: that a combination of political forces (principally uniform government regulation) and academic norms and values impel systems to become more homogenous (van Vught 1996). However, because the pressure on institutions to raise their status and emulate the more esteemed (the phenomenon of so-called academic drift) is fairly widespread across systems, it raises the challenge of explaining the conditions that support or counteract the propensity of institutions to become more or less homogenous (Teichler 2008).

Among these conditions is the existence, or otherwise, of an extended hierarchy of institutions, including non-universities. The presence of such institutions can complicate the picture because they may simultaneously be both a part of the higher education system at the same time as belonging in an administrative sense to another system. This is pre-eminently so in the case of US community colleges. As Rothblatt (2007) has argued, such community colleges are the lynchpin of American ‘public higher education’. Citing the example of the University of California, he suggests that ‘the respect it earns from public opinion and the state’s legislature, is more dependent upon the success of the community colleges than the professors might suppose’

(Rothblatt 2007: 266). Tellingly, he also draws attention to the essential similarity between such colleges and the English colleges of further education for, like their US counterparts, the latter 'are not institutionally part of higher education, but some of the courses they offer are in that category' (Rothblatt 2007: 266).

Rothblatt's observation about the institutional status of colleges draws attention to a wider set of questions, not just about the purposes of this segment of a mass system, but the institutional implications of managing the boundaries between and across the administrative divisions that separate and distinguish the two adjacent 'further' and 'higher' education sectors. There is a significant literature on related themes in the American context, far less so in the English. The value of such insights is less in trying to draw direct Anglo-American comparisons than in understanding the significance of institutional arrangements, particular in view, as we have noted, of the English policy of ascribing a special mission to FECs in expanding HE opportunities, particularly at sub-degree level (HEFCE 2006a; 2006b).

To help in the task of making empirical sense of these issues the next section outlines some relevant theoretical and conceptual perspectives on how and why processes of differentiation or dedifferentiation may occur within different institutions. The aim is to provide a supporting framework to help explain how diversity occurs and its significance for understanding at a more abstract level the meaning of duality as it was played out in the case study institutions.

### **The 'potential for permeability': some theoretical and conceptual orientations to duality**

This 'institutionalisation' of the FE/HE divide challenges many previous conceptions of duality precisely because the interface is not just between institutions but also within them. As Boccock and Scott (1995) predicted, the 'potential for permeability' of FHE arrangements has increased, but in the process it has taken duality from 'life-at-the-margins' and placed it firmly at the core of institutional mission. The consequence of this process is to re-direct attention to institutional processes and their effects on individual organisations. We are interested in organisational configurations, not purely in the sense of an 'administrative analysis', but as 'social institutions'

(Selznick 1957: 6) that are pursuing particular goals within dual environments or 'fields' where the rules of the game are less clear, more contingent and potentially conflicted.

A close reading of the literature exploring themes of organisational change in higher education reinforces the view that institutional theory, especially the concept of isomorphism, has been widely employed to explain the drivers that push institutions towards dedifferentiation and greater homogeneity. In the theory of institutional isomorphism as advanced by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) the claim is that in the long run organisations in a given field are shaped by rational decisions that drive them to become more similar as they adapt to their environments. Three sources of isomorphic pressures are identified as organisations are structured into a field.

Coercive pressures are essentially political and are imposed on organisations, typically by governments. Mimetic pressures stem from uncertainty in environments, the instability engendered inducing organisations to model themselves on other organisations perceived to be successful. Normative forces are derived from sources of professionalisation and socialisation, typically among institutional leaders. This source tends to perpetuate the reproduction of familiar structures, processes and cultures within organisational life. The net result is a strong tendency towards homogenization – pressure to conform – at the same time, paradoxically, as leaders struggle to try to change the organisation.

The theory of isomorphism can be illustrated with reference to the fairly uniform environmental conditions encountered by higher education organisations, the strong influence of academic norms and values and the imposition of sometimes quite coercive government regimes designed to establish consistency for a combination of policy and accountability purposes. Mimetic pressures to follow the examples of perceived successful organisations in the field are strong and are reinforced arguably by global pressures, especially among the sub-field of the world leading research intensive universities to follow an emerging global model (Mohrman et al 2008) and by leadership structures and cultures that also institutionalise certain isomorphic practices across different systems (Adams and Smith 2009).

The apparent lack of differentiation and diversity of organisational forms found in higher education systems stands in apparently stark contrast to the variety, complexity, contradictions and, hence, diversity of forms that are held to characterise the cross or dual field of further and higher education (FHE) (Parry and Thompson 2002). While we have attempted previously to characterise the wide range of arrangements that constitute the field of FHE (Parry, Thompson and Blackie 2006) we recognise that doing justice to the nuances of our data on organisational change and transition requires a more refined set of analytical tools.

This realisation redirected our attention to the importance of understanding dual sector institutions as boundary organisations. In this way the expression of widening participation also becomes institutionalised. By this we mean that what characterises dual-sector institutions is not merely their position in either FE or HE, but the meaning of their presence in both fields. For these institutions, notionally at least, the boundary between further and higher education is less what divides them than in a symbolic sense what joins them. The potential for permeability, then, can be reinterpreted as the potential to offer provision that enables transition across the boundary with all the connotations of seamless progression as students move effortlessly from further into higher levels of study.

In other words, we are interested in how institutional leaders rationalise organisational involvement in the two fields and how this involvement impacts on organisational commitments to key areas of purpose, identity and activity. Despite the wide literature on widening participation this organisational schema across the segment of institutions offering both further and higher education is generally not discussed. Our interest in the organisational manifestation of widening participation distinguishes our research from previous work in the area. It is a focus closely related to the process of position-taking in relation to boundaries. This notion assumes competition in the field for resources, status or power and reflects Bourdieu's 'space of possibles' where position-taking in fields is 'objectively realised as a problematic in the forms of the actual or potential position-takings corresponding to the different positions' (Bourdieu 1993: 30).

In referring to position in the field with interview participants the intention was to reveal not just organisational understanding of position within the relative fields, but their interpretations of the ‘space of creative works’ (Bourdieu 1993: 39). In other words, the research wished to make sense of the alignment of the institution with what might be considered the art of the possible in making transitions across fields. Our approach takes a conventional approach to the construction of empirical case studies of institutional boundary encounters. However, we sought to inject more meaning into these narrative accounts by delving beyond theories of organisational isomorphism. Two further sets of boundary related concepts proved relevant.

The first draw on conceptions of boundary decisions that affect organisational transactions and strategies. These decisions are based on the framework advanced by Santos and Eisenhardt (2005) comprising efficiency, power, competence and identity conceptions of boundaries. Briefly, in the *efficiency* concept, based essentially on transaction cost theory derived from economics, organisations orientate to boundaries in ways that will best serve governance efficiency. From a *power* perspective the orientation to a boundary is driven less by efficiency than by increasing control – whether over uncertain markets, partners, or activities. The aim is to exert control and influence though without necessarily changing position in relation to the legal boundaries. A *competence* concept of boundaries focuses on improving the position of the organisation in relation to resources. By new forms of partnerships, products or services the organisation seeks to gain the resources to support growth and create autonomy.

However, of these boundary conceptions it is the fourth, *identity*, which we perceive to be of particular relevance to the present study. Organisational identity is about cohesiveness and a sense of ‘who’ or ‘what’ we are. This concept demands of leaders a comprehension of how shifts in relation to boundaries will impact on core identities. Where a positional change in relation to a boundary dilutes established senses of identity then the result may be competitive weakness; where it strengthens identity then it builds competitive advantage (Santos and Eisenhardt 2005). Over time organizations become infused with values beyond the technical requirements of their tasks: ‘the organization acquires a character structure, a distinctive identity’ (Scott 2001: 24, emphasis added). Boundaries and how the organization relates to them are

an influential element in understanding the preferred ways of organizing specific activities or services.

At stake in the identity concept, then, is how organisations imagine themselves. In organisational literature, image and identity are closely related. Image can be defined as how organisational members would like external audiences to see them; identity reflects what the kind of organisation members believe they work in. Huisman (2008) has demonstrated how by careful use of the concepts of image and identity it is possible to refine some of the expectations about isomorphic behaviours flowing from institutional theory. Dual and mixed economy institutions operate in environments that arguably are even more multi-actor and multi-stakeholder than single sector higher or further education institutions. Following Huisman (2008) it is possible to predict even greater goal ambiguity for the former type of organisations with considerably more scope for manoeuvre between image and identity.

At issue, then, in these conceptual orientations is how organisations perceive the ‘potential for permeability’ across the boundary and how this impacts on images and identities. Why stretch across two fields is the core question and what are the implications for organisational configurations and dispositions? To what extent do leaders see holding fast in one field, despite involvement in another, as a staple task or, conversely to what extent do they see a need to make organisational transitions that would change position, identity and orientation to the boundaries?

### **Types of transition: models and illustrations**

We have already commented above that compared to higher education institutions which are frequently seen to reflect the homogenising effects of isomorphic pressures, dual and mixed economy institutions appear more complex and contradictory and hence diverse in configurations and arrangements. (Parry and Thompson 2002; Parry, Thompson and Blackie 2006). However, a key question for the present study concern the dynamics of the process that might explain divergent experiences resulting from decisions to make transitions, and in extreme cases, transfers across the boundary from one sector to another.

In the business world it is well established that organizational changes such as mergers, acquisitions, strategic alliances and de-couplings may transfer all or part of the organization from one field to another and that transfer can result in the redefinition and renegotiation of boundaries. As was noted above, such boundary decisions are important because they are based on understandings of, and potential changes to, 'who we are'. But they are important also because they reflect broader propositions about strategies and structures. In Chandler's (1962) classic exposition of course, strategy is defined as 'the determination of the basic long-term goals and objectives of the enterprise, and the adoption of course of action and the allocation of resources necessary for carrying out these goals.' Structure is defined as 'the design of organisation through which the enterprise is administered' (Chandler 1962: 13-14). Structure is usually held to follow strategy, but Chandler identified the accompanying critical question: 'Why did the new strategy, which called for a change in structure, come in the first place?' (Chandler 1962: 14).

In the education sector the traditional image of bureaucratic organisations does not link so readily with such business-market oriented behaviours. Yet in the context of dual or mixed economy institutions Chandler's question about the sources of new strategy, and hence the need for new structures, seems particularly apposite. There is of course a well documented trend for institutions to develop through transition across both organizational types, including perforce, across sectors typically through mergers with organisations in adjacent fields or sectors.

However, the problem with the transfer concept in particular is that it tends to be posited in a manner that perceives it occurring only when there is a commitment to status change, in dual-sector terms normally from FE to HE institution. In the contemporary setting of English further and higher education sectors, legal or formal transfer from FE to HE only becomes a possibility when the provisions set out in the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 are satisfied. There is no open-ended option for institutions to transfer (KPMG LLP 200?).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> On the assumption that the direction of travel is likely to be from FE to HE in order to be considered eligible for transfer they must satisfy a minimum threshold of provision in HE, that is at least 55 per cent of their total student numbers must be at that level or above.

Underlying these provisions is the assumption that the proportion or size of HE in relation to FE constitutes some form of critical mass threshold. Transfer in effect becomes institutionalized as leaders seek to shift and embed the goals, cultures and values associated with the new organizational field. The key point is that in a stratified system of HE it is only through the process of successful transfer that the newly promoted institution figures within the status hierarchy of the HE system (see the US Carnegie classification for one example of how this process is captured: van Vught et al 2005). Without formal transfer the institution does not register either as a 'birth', 'death' or 'positional change' within the system classification. The net result arguably is that diversity tends to be under-recorded or even unrecorded.

However, these divergent experiences are a key part of understanding the contribution of colleges in the further education sector to the expansion, differentiation and diversification of English higher education. At the very least we require a more detailed and nuanced understanding of the processes of transition, including transfer, around the dual sector boundary. The aim in this section therefore is to identify an initial empirically based typology of dual-sector organisations based on the notion of types of transfer. The typology is constructed around the evidence from the institutional case studies which, it will be recalled, were designed to explore thematically the rationales for making organisational transitions across the dual-sector boundary. These themes enable us to re-construct from the interview and documentary data a series of narratives designed to illustrate how stories of transition translate into plans or strategies for being dual-sector, the structural challenges of implementing or operating in a dual-sector environment and an assessment of the success factors or barriers to being dual-sector.

The dynamic element in these accounts, indeed behind the very idea of an initial typology, is the theme of transition: that being dual-sector requires of institutions a greater degree of mobility around boundaries than is normally exhibited by single sector counterparts. The types of transition which follow are based on the evidence

from the 11 case study institutions.<sup>8</sup> No attempt is made to extend the typology across the broader population of dual or mixed economy institutions. Nor are the types empirically distinct. Models were found in our case studies exemplifying several types of transition taking place over time, sometimes serially, if not simultaneously. We also found cases where there were certain similarities in terms of history, mission, size or structural arrangement playing out very differently in terms of transition rationales, trajectories and, we suppose, eventual outcomes.

The key point is that transition is a dynamic rather than fixed property: the institutions involved have trajectories that evolve over time and the typology is inevitably based primarily on a snapshot of the state of play as interpreted by the participants at the time of the visits. Hence the following types of transition are a device to understand how institutions are responding to dual-sector pressures and tensions. They are not advanced as a form of theory testing. Nor are the cases used to illustrate the typology selected randomly. On the contrary, they were selected precisely because externally they projected differences in terms of their organisational behaviours, trajectories, internal configurations and dispositions. Hence the typology is offered as a device to help compare and contrast different responses to the conflicting needs, tensions and constraints associated with being in some way dual-sector.

Four types or models of institutional transitions are identified: *transaction*, *transfer*, *merger*, and *decoupling*. These are developed and explained through illustrations from the 10 English case study sites. These are inevitably brief or episodic commentaries rather than complete institutional narratives, but the aim is to support the building of summary abstractions about the processes and dynamics involved in boundary encounters. The findings from the models are presented in the final concluding section of the paper.

### **1. Transaction: dual sector transitions in two ‘technical’ colleges: the cases of Glaister and Whiting Colleges**

<sup>8</sup> One of these, an exemplar of an Australian dual sector institution, will form the subject of a later companion paper exploring comparative perspectives in different tertiary systems.

The essence of the transaction model is its emphasis on maintaining sector and associated brand identities. This in itself represents both a strategic consideration as well as a strategic challenge, particularly in terms of devising governance and management models that enable the boundary crossing to add value without disrupting or corrupting core purposes and identities. The transactional models recounted here illustrate the tensions raised by such boundary crossings and the different arrangements that can emerge to enable or facilitate dual-sector provision to be operationalised. These cases exemplify how being a college in further education can provide strong rationale for institutional positioning notwithstanding engagement across the further-higher boundary. Strategically higher education offers important market or resource advantages but sector attachment, for slightly different reasons in each case, remains paramount.

### *The institutions*

Both institutions possess similar ‘technical college’ histories serving local industries, especially engineering, mining and associated trades. With these sectors in long-term decline and a combination of deprivation and low participation in post-compulsory education in their respective hinterlands, each College has developed strong social missions focused on improving access and participation. Despite significant economic restructuring the Colleges have retained strong links with key local employers and these links form the basis of some unique work-related provision embedded in the local context. Nevertheless, overall participation and Level 4 employment among the communities served by the Colleges remain lower on average than both national and regional rates. Insularity and a marked reluctance to go outside community boundaries to access study opportunities and work remain defining characteristics in both local populations.

The decision in both Colleges to extend into higher education was described more as an evolution, rather than a strong strategic drive to change institutional mission. The Principal of Glaister, for example, explained that their social mission was:

strategic in that we thought long term about it, but we didn’t think about positioning and we didn’t think sufficiently about what it meant to us in terms of the impact upon our image and the impact upon our resources, our staffing

arrangements and so on, it was very much seen almost as a natural extension of what was Adult Higher Education and an interest at that time already. We did have a very successful Access programme so there seemed to be a ready market already inside the College. So some kind of strategic thought went into it but I would say sort of serendipity and a little bit of opportunism also played a part in terms of how we came to be where we were.

A similar rationale was applied at Whiting where over the same period access provision was joined in a rather haphazard way by non-prescribed work serving the needs of local businesses. The HE manager, who had worked at the College for 20 years, observed:

I mean it's interesting really because I think sort of historically our HE has just developed incrementally really, we've always had HE, it's been an opportunity for progression for our level 3s, it's largely been taken up by curriculum areas which were interested in it to some extent, or where there was traditionally HE from years ago really.... I have to say in an area like [that served by Whiting College] you do....you know, the Widening Participation agenda has been very strong all the time that I've been here and, you know, move on to progression. But anecdotally I mean I've taught lots of students who have come up - some of them from BTEC first - who have gone on and got a degree, and got quite a good degree and some have been away to university and come back because they haven't perhaps had the support that they need, or they've not reached that stage. And then we have a lot of sort of adult returners as well who traditionally come back, who work within the locality.

Despite similar trajectories into HE provision the Colleges nevertheless differ in the scale of their HE activities. At Glaister just under 10 per cent of provision was classed as HE at the time of the visit. It has aspirations to grow this to 15 per cent. At Whiting around a third of students (ftes) were studying in HE. These differences in scale were reflected in institutional identities. Glaister was clear that:

Our core purpose, we are an FE college inside out and back to front and would always want to be.

HE Manager

In contrast Whiting College counted itself as a mixed economy college and had committed to bidding to becoming a designated HE Centre (HEC) under the terms of the new 'University Challenge' scheme (HEFCE 2008). What explains these different trajectories and how were they rationalised by the respondents?

As a preface to answering this question it is important to note that similarities in histories and communities were joined by similar partnership experiences. In earlier years each College had been courted by universities anxious to develop various forms of partnership work. In the case of Glaister College, the Principal agreed that FE remained 'the essence of us', but recalled how:

We seemed to arrive at the natural point when the universities were receptive. So, you know, we weren't pushing at a closed door, it was very much encouraged by the Vice Chancellors at the time.

Collaborative provision between Glaister and several partners developed concurrently, just as did at Whiting College. In the latter case the decision to work with several, rather than just one, partners was influenced by a realistic sense of market vulnerability. As the HE Manager observed:

We've had a long relationship with [HEI] but again, HEIs, their mission changes. We've been in partnership with [another HEI] a long time.... And I suppose there is always a worry, because it does happen with FE colleges, that if you do put all your eggs in one basket and you have a new Vice Chancellor or whatever and the university's mission changes, then you know to some extent we've taken this pluralistic approach so that....for self-preservation really.

Despite multiple (and changing) partners and a combination of direct and indirect funding for their HE provision, the Colleges were developing different perceptions of how to organise, configure and brand their identities. The firm commitment of Glaister College to its FE identity was carefully protected against any encroachment on existing identities and organisational structures. According to the Principal this strategic decision was based on the view that:

We wanted our higher education and our further education to sit equally side by side, so it was the same staff delivering both FE and HE. There was no separation in terms of resources for students. So it was very much based on an equal treatment. We didn't set up dedicated centres and that kind of a way in which many colleges have done.

As provision across boundaries developed however there were challenges to unified provision. Strategy had to be, in the words of Glaister's Principal, mixed with 'a degree of pragmatism, but,' he continued:

what we were trying to always do was ensure that we never set a precedent that would just become the normal way of thinking about these things. Now the universities found it very hard when they were looking at validating say their franchise programmes, that some of our answers perhaps didn't always give them the kinds of answer that they were expecting.... So even now we've maintained some of those principles of "no special treatment" but there are, there are some local arrangements that are pragmatic solutions to sometimes [difficult] problems.

The pressures internally and externally were to head in different directions in organisational terms. The Principal again:

Classically at some point the HE students as I remember, and to some extent still do, they expect and demand a more studious, quieter kind of environment. They expect....they did get things like common rooms, you know, they're separate, you know, "we're much more senior to your other students so we need....and more grown up" that kind of angle. But then there were resource issues to do with validation for example.... the ... question that always, always comes back is how staff who teach on degree programmes engage in the pursuit of knowledge and studious endeavour. And that was always difficult for us, always difficult, because staff were arguing for different terms and conditions and this demanded in their view a considerable reduction in what would be their expected teaching hours across other FE programmes in order for them to be able to prepare and do the HE.... [W]e had teachers and students pushing us to mimic universities, that's what it was all about, there were frustrated FE teachers that really wanted to be in a university but couldn't make that transition for whatever reason. And everything was around mimicry

This notion of pressure from mimicry can be rephrased as a source of mimetic isomorphic pressure from within combined with some coercive pressure from without, to become more like the sponsoring or franchising HE institutions. It was prevalent during the 1990s as the College followed a 'classic adult education' drive. Extending across the boundary into HE offered not just enhanced access to resources (a competence concept of boundaries perhaps) but an expansion of opportunities for local people. However, even though Glaister was seeking to control its vulnerability to the perceived volatility and low marginal returns of the FE market by extending across a boundary into a new, more lucrative, one, for the organisation paradoxically there was some loss or ceding of power to the more powerfully positioned universities with whom collaboration over franchising and validation was essential.

### *The limitations of duality*

At Whiting it is possible to detect strong resonances with these coercive and mimetic pressures to become more like an HEI, but the organisational trajectory was rather different. Like Glaister College, provision of HE has traditionally been dispersed across several sites and courses with facilities shared between disparate subject areas and levels of study. The HE Manager explained:

we're looking to build up our HE numbers and obviously quite a lot of colleges locally, you know, the bigger ones like ... have gone down the road of separating out their HE and FE. Now we haven't done that, but we are being driven more from a quality perspective to actually have separate systems for HE quality assurance and that's driving us, HEFCE is driving us really as regards ensuring in a sort of ... parity of a student experience and obviously ensuring that the students get a good experience within an FE environment.

The strategic decision to bid to become a designated HE Centre was adding to these pressures, though the Principal certainly did not take it as axiomatic that a successful bid would automatically challenge the College's existing mixed economy identity. The rationale for pursuing an HE Centre was based less on any notional transfer across the sector boundary from FE/LSC to HE/HEFCE than across different conceptualisations of other boundaries. Rather than a formal transfer to HE status, therefore, the strategic aim being developed at Whiting was described as acquiring an 'HE frontage'. What was meant by a frontage and how would this affect the College's positioning in relation to the FE/HE boundary?

To answer this question it is necessary to understand perceptions within the College of working across dual regimes of further and higher education. Certainly the Principal expressed frustration at working within the bureaucratic tutelage of the LSC, in two linked senses. Once was a perception of excessive LSC bureaucracy; the other was a consequential fear of financial vulnerability. Hence a key objective, agreed by the Board of Governors, is diversifying College income. Currently around 40 per cent is derived from none-LSC sources; the aim is to lift this to 45 percent. It was recognised that to achieve this aim would require the College to develop people:

So yes we have looked at how viable it is as an organisation and carried out that kind of exercise. So when we're running classes we're looking at viability but HE goes into a different model, because you could actually close something down with under 10 in which was viable which wouldn't be under

an LSC model. And the areas that are used to those....you know, one thing is about getting our divisional managers used to dealing with different income streams. So I think there is quite a strong push [to diversify]  
(Principal, Whiting College)

Whilst the judgement was that working in the HE sector offered a stronger financial model this area also offered some potential threats. Within the team responsible for HE the fear had been articulated that:

this new regime might be seen as a drive by HEFCE to try and get some rationalisation. Now HEFCE have denied all that...that there isn't. But again, there's always this idea where...if you've got less than 100 FTEs should you really be delivering HE unless it is in a niche area or there's a demand in that particular institution.

(HE Manager, Whiting College)

Acquiring the frontage afforded by status as a HE Centre was seen as entirely consistent with these opportunities and threats. The strategy of driving up HE numbers and pursuing income diversification exemplified a competence conceptualisation of the FHE boundary. Yet financial viability was linked closely with a power concept of the boundary and how relationships with HE partners and other stakeholders are perceived. Hence the HE 'frontage' would offer competitive or power advantages in a local context where there were several local HEIs competitors as well as potential suitors in a bid for HEC status. The challenge in bringing together these elements, as the Principal averred, is to do so in ways that maintain a steady alignment with the established identity of the College.

The case site visit took place before the outcome of the bid for HEC status was formally lodged. Although the general strategy and partnership model had been agreed by the College governors, there were still several options on the table regarding the physical location of the Centre and its relationship with existing subject clusterings and levels of study. However, the project to bring in HE Centre status was not in any way seen as signalling intent to transfer from FE to HE. Nor would the College be seeking Foundation degree awarding powers even if the Centre bid proved successful.

The juxtaposition of a strategy for income diversification, growing HE yet consciously not seeking degree awarding powers, symbolised how sectors influenced activities. For the Principal this came down to systems and cultures. The HE sector is a national system with its own order or brand in which there are is a fairly clear pecking order. Following the American model where the degree might be awarded by the local College was unappealing in an English context precisely because of that pecking order. The HE Manager expressed this sentiment clearly:

I mean in all honesty I don't think that [awarding Foundation degrees] is the aim of the college. I mean you can see almost, as you were saying, a drift as some of the larger colleges are saying "well looking for a foundation degree would empower" and I know that forums that I attend, the larger colleges are looking to have that. I don't think that would be anything that we would look at, first of all the sheer cost and also the fact that usually our relationships with our universities are good and being utterly brutal, who would necessarily want a degree from [Whiting College] when they could have one from [Universities of...] or wherever.

(HE Manager, Whiting College)

The perceived danger to the College arising from an overt attempt to break into the higher education pecking order was finding a way of becoming dual-sector. Abandoning an FE sector identity was something the Principal wished to avoid. Being mixed economy did not sit easily with either the image or reality of something dual-sector because, in the Principal's words: the College was:

very much as a mixed economy but I definitely don't see it as dual because there are so many more income streams coming in than just those two.

There was no inherent conflict therefore between seeking an HE 'frontage' whilst maintaining a mixed economy identity. The acquisition of degree awarding powers, would effectively undermine that identity because it would involve inventing a dual-sector identity. Dual-sector would be a mistake not just because of the English pecking order but because of the need to deal with different markets and their associated income streams. Although the attributes and cultures associated with the two sectors were deemed important, they are not considered as defining. On the contrary, as the Principal maintained:

I think there is certainly a brand FE and HE and I think there's quite a lot of reports that say there is that brand, that you are more likely to get local learners, it's about widening participation and the benefits of that, so I think there is that brand. I think that where do you look for your inspiration, your vision? You're looking probably....well you're looking at both but you are obviously looking at HE about how can you get more of that within an FE environment. Now whether HE also needs to look how they can get more FE into their environment I would challenge them and say they probably do.

### *The threat to identity at Glaister College*

The alternative conceptions of transfer and identity articulated in Whiting College resonate closely with perspectives at Glaister. Although the scale of its HE provision is smaller the College has faced similar competitive and market segmentation pressures to its established identity. In recent years the emphasis on adult community learning around an Access oriented liberal adult education model, has shifted progressively towards a firmly vocational model built around an employer and skills agenda. This has left the College vulnerable to its market position as some revenue streams began to evaporate. This had led to a series of painful decisions to disengage from one form of historically rooted community engagement in favour of other forms of engagement. As the Principal observed: 'About three years ago the LSC said: "Oh, we've now got priorities for success, you deliver these kinds of qualifications. All of that adult fluffy stuff we don't want you to do anymore"...

Far from maximizing organisational resources or control over external markets the extension across the border into HE based on an access or widening participation model had begun to loosen older conceptions of community engagement through technical education and also began to undermine notions of a distinctive organisational mission. The Principal's reflection on this process was blunt:

I mean at the time I thought.... you know, looking in the other direction then I certainly was persuaded and actively engaged in the process of looking at providing local opportunities for local people in local higher education as a good thing to do, but whether it was the right thing to do is, I think, less....I'm less clear about that, less certain about it now than I was.

The outcome at Glaister College has been a re-forging of institutional identity around two core businesses, each a reflection of the external volatility of current policy.

First, a 16-19 sixth form centre stretched to accommodate an as yet unknown 14-19

dimension; and, second, the 'adult skills with higher skills agenda', increasingly referenced by the translation from Lifelong Learning Networks into Higher Skills Networks. The HE Manager believed neither business sat purely within either FE or HE, as more traditionally defined:

So we're very much along the Leitch agenda and higher skills works for me because that's what we're about and I think that's what foundation degrees represent, the higher skills. So that's our core business, Adults and Higher Skills that will be some HE and then a ....14-19...14-16 sixth form college, where I think two different kinds of workforce will evolve within the college.

Although the erosion of community reach-out had been painful these new agendas have, paradoxically, justified some of the earlier decisions to resist drift from an FE towards a separated HE model. The HE Manager elaborated further:

I mean we want to come up and sort of sit there on the other side of the line but, you know, we have no ambitions to see that transition extend disproportionately our role in higher education. I mean the kind of numbers I've suggested to you I think represent a reasonable amount of stretch and an appropriate use of higher education inside this college to top out - I use that word - to top out our vocational pathways. That would be a good thing to do. But beyond that I think you start to hit a [wall]. You would need to become a different kind of organisation with different sort of values and different sort of core purpose.

The shift from widening participation to a skills agenda at the heart of Glaister College's core purpose is significant in two separate but linked ways. First, it had necessitated a reconfiguring of organisational structure around a differentiated model. Although a core staff is retained financed by a roughly 50/50 split in income streams from the two core businesses, about three-quarters of income from adult skills is delivered by contract, rather than establishment, staff. The HE Manager explained this arrangement as a response to the fluidity of the LSC agenda on skills. The outflow, he claimed, was that

If you asked our staff what it meant to them, where they saw the boundaries and what they saw the identity of the college to be, they wouldn't recognise much of that work, it's almost transparent to them. Because the contracting is largely done by the Finance Director, it's a contract that's almost like a service level agreement with all of the caveats to do with performance and so on, and it's a straight forward transactional kind of thing.... The staff very rarely come into the college because it's all on employer's premises, so there's a whole raft

of people inside the college don't even know that it goes on. They know....somehow the college is as big as it's stated to be but I only see this bit of the college, so the "how do we get to do all of that" is quite hidden from them because those people don't necessarily have to come into [Glaister] College and all we've got is good contract management skills and project management skills with a network of external organisations.

The notion of moving towards a 'virtual college' model offered leaders the flexibility to respond to an increasingly unstable policy and market environment yet deliver on mission commitments that remained closely aligned with the identity conception of the staff still on the College establishment. In the conceptualization of boundaries it enhanced both competence and power conceptions of the organisations encounter with the HE boundary. Competence not just because the LSC skills agenda is good business in a financial sense, but because the idea of tailoring staffing levels to resource capture was facilitated through flexible response:

...the other thing that's interesting about the Adult Skills - and it is coming back to that Debenhams model - we're becoming a facilitator, rather than a direct deliverer of that we almost "know a man that can make it happen" so we build partnerships and we build sort of very flexible delivery models with private sector organisations, with independent training providers. We don't necessarily have to be the employer of the staff, we've just got to make the training happen.

(HE Manager, Glaister College)

Yet the importance of an invigorated power conception of the boundary was also evident. By forging close partnership arrangements with employers, rather than just other higher education providers, the College had developed a distinctive positioning within the educational landscape. The LSC celebrates the close relationship with a major employer, local schools see the advantages for students, whilst universities 'would also see that kind of relationship – but we've got it'. For the Principal, the emergence of a more clearly delineated mission had clear implications for strategic purpose and organisational distinctiveness:

I can now more clearly understand why I'm in higher education now, I could explain that at great lengths to you, I think if we went into a very robust debate about the merits of what I've said in our historic engagement I think you would quickly unravel some of our arguments. But on the current agenda, the vocational foundation degree agenda, working with employers and engaging in transferring knowledge out of the workplace through to the heads and minds

of people engaged in those activities, I think we're good at that and I think we add real value to the process.

### *Summary*

These cases illustrate transactional perceptions of duality, transitions and boundaries in two colleges with similar technical traditions and orientations. The Colleges vary in size and the proportions of FE to HE. One is determined to keep faith with its FE ethos and brand; the other has become mixed economy, a variant on the FE brand, but one it too wishes to keep despite bidding with partners to acquire HE Centre status. Despite these differences there are some interesting similarities in orientations to and transitions across the sector boundary between FE and HE. Neither Whiting nor Glaister define themselves in terms of being 'dual-sector'. Their search for organisational survival and competitive edge in a competitive post-compulsory system is dictated primary by identity (who we are) and competence (resources) concepts of boundaries. Hence their provision stretches across the FHE divide in order to construct meaningful relationships with employers and skills needs in a variety of contexts. Commitment to the FE sector remains strong and strategic.

Social mission and widening participation strategies are outcomes rather than drivers of their boundary orientations and sector attachments. This is a recent shift, arguably, and indicates an opening up of a key area of differentiation from parts of the HE sector. There is no evidence of organisational rebranding in order to re-construct provision across the boundary, even where it is arranged in partnership with universities. On the contrary, the pressure is on how to provide firmer coupling between organisational structures, identity and brand in a crowded market place. Internally there are numerous transitions across boundaries, but the idea of a formal transfer of status from one sector to another is eschewed. What counts are internal transactions around and across the boundary.

## **2. Transfer: duality in three specialist institutions: the cases of Citygate, Churchtown and Pirnmill Bay Colleges**

The transfer model is illustrated with reference primarily to Citygate College, a specialist higher education institution which moved from the FE to HE sector approximately five years ago. At the time of the visit therefore it was already

established as an HE College which continued to draw LSC funding for its FE work. This case forms the principal focus, but it is contrasted with two other specialist providers – Churchtown and Pirrmill Bay Colleges – both of which have chosen to remain in the FE sector, alongside higher level provision. Key points of comparison in terms of size, funding and other selection rationale are provided in Table 1 in Working Paper 5. The aim in this section is to delineate the factors that impelled Citygate to make the leap from one sector to another and to compare these to the strategic considerations at Churchtown and Pirrmill Bay that lay behind maintaining status in the FE sector.

*Citygate College: transfer from FE to HE as ‘epiphany’?*

Citygate is late-Victorian in origin with a long history of educational provision for food/catering and related crafts. Its founders, the local city council, were to remain a dominant influence on institutional development formally until the shift to independent college status. Informally, this municipal influence has continued to exert a lingering influence on more recent decisions, including transfer. Over time the College’s provision extended beyond its original specialism in a somewhat eclectic manner. A move to the present main site during the 1960s was followed by a growing portfolio of higher level work during the 1970s, much of the original provision evolving into HNCs and HNDs especially in food, home economics and more recently food technology and hospitality. Other specialisms, some only loosely related to food but nevertheless part of a craft tradition, have been added over time to reflect changes in the local economy including BAs in some niche areas of provision. Apart from the legacy of municipal control the other principal drivers of organisational strategy have been sharp regional competition with other providers and the nature of collaborative arrangements with HE partners.

Superficially all three Colleges share a coherence of institutional identity derived less from levels of study than from subject domains and disciplines. They have similar craft orientations within their curricula and these feed through into the need to provide working environments to enable practice based learning. Despite these elements of similarity, by choosing to transfer from FE to HE the trajectory of Citygate College sets it apart. Few institutions in the sector have (so far) chosen to transfer their status.

What were the strategic considerations behind this decision and how has it impacted on organisational management arrangements?

The evidence from interview and related documentary data suggests that the drivers of transfer at Citygate derived less from a shifting sense of identity than a combination of competence and efficiency conceptions of the dual-sector boundary. Two factors were identified by respondents as critical to the transfer trajectory.

The first concerned the impact of the College's competitive position as a specialist provider. By the 1980s the College had already carved a niche position in the local and regional market for non-advanced further education. With around 15 per cent of its students on HND and other higher level courses the decision was taken to put HE work in a separate building in order to provide a different student experience. This decision was reinforced by the development of degree provision. After an initial foray into the market for a joint honours degree in conjunction with one HE partner, the College expanded its degree provision and began seeking other suitable validating partners in the HE sector. During the 1990s provision was further extended into postgraduate programmes.

The shift into degree programmes marked an important turning point in the College's development and sense of identity. Formal transfer from FE to HE lay a decade or so in the future. What counted in the later 1980s and early 1990s was the realisation that the College possessed extensive capability and capacity among its core staff both to develop and deliver degree programmes. Although working with HE partners was essential to developing the programmes the launch of the first joint degree involved immersion in the then CNA A validation process.<sup>9</sup> This experience was described by one of the Vice-Principals as 'almost a kind of epiphany'. The programme, he continued:

went through a very, very painful birth and the validation....I don't know if you remember the old CNA A days, validation days, they were quite adversarial events weren't they and there was a lot of challenge directed to the

<sup>9</sup> The Council for National Academic Awards (CNA A) awarded degrees to polytechnics and other non-university institutions from 1965 until 1995.

college members of the presenting side in terms of our credibility which we felt was a little misdirected really given what we had seen of the CVs of the [HE partner] staff. And that was probably the Eureka point, if you like, that we realised that we didn't have to apologise for our staff any more, that our staff were actually at least as good as, at least as capable as staff at [HE partner] And I personally trace a lot of the kind of self-confidence that we've now got back to that moment, although not many staff who were there at that time are still....well they're not here any more but there was just something about that moment that enabled us all to say "we can do it".

(Vice-Principal A, Citygate College)

The extension into degree programmes altered the balance of the College's activities, confirming a sense that its identity that was already shifting towards something less obviously further education in the traditional sense. As the same Vice-Principal reflected:

I would say that we've never been like any FE college that I've ever worked in or had experience of, which is....I've had a lot of experience of FE colleges. We've always had more of the characteristics....not all of them but more of the characteristics of many of the former polys I suppose you'd say. Even on the craft side there has always been a feeling that....well certainly when I came here there was always a feeling that we were perhaps in the market for the top end of those craft skills, and whilst we offered very kind of preparatory type training for those craft skills as well, where the real heart was always at the higher level.

The formal 'tipping point' which served to demonstrate a penchant for higher level work came in 1999/2000 when the number of HE students overtook those in FE. It was explained however that the shifting balance of activities reflected the growth of HE opportunities more than any loss of interest in providing lower level courses. The emphasis in these years was on positioning the College so that:

We were able to move quickly, even our teacher plans and our mission was really to position ourselves in the market and if there was a growth we were able to not think about it for 12 months but to make a bid there and then because we realised that what we needed to do.... We need both, we need FE and HE to survive and what we tried to do is position ourselves so if FE grew then we'd go along with that and if HE grew obviously we'd have a chance at that. And we looked at priority areas and things and some of the priority areas we were doing very well through European Social Fund, we were taking people from poorer backgrounds, widening participation.

(Vice-Principal B, Citygate)

A strong culture of competitive opportunism had infused the organisation and provided capacity to do new things, to respond to the sense that as 'a specialist college we ought to be doing something different to other people' (Vice-Principal A,

Citygate). Yet opportunism was more a vehicle rather than a driver of change. The final years of local authority control of the College had been marked by sharp financial constraints with restrictive controls placed on budgets. The scope for institution building through expansion was limited. The Principal during that era had responded by developing a 'buccaneering spirit', compensating for Council under-funding by scouring the market for:

alternative income streams really just to keep the daily fabric of the place in a decent condition, it wasn't to do anything grand, it was to keep the place looking how you wanted it. And so given that the further education side was capped, the income streams from higher education students and other kind of industry-related work were very, very important and those colleges that realised that and were willing to invest in that side in the city are the ones which have really thrived. The ones which didn't are the ones which have either gone to the wall or are very quickly going there.

(Vice-Principal A, Citygate College)

Once the shackles of Council control were removed the rationale for working across the boundary began to shift. A resource or competence conception of working across the FE and HE boundary which had hitherto dominated developments was joined by an efficiency conception. This was explained neatly by one of the interviewees:

We were still effectively, even though the FEFC was now coming in, we were still effectively capped in terms of our numbers, it was still difficult for us to grow on the FE side. And frankly we'd seen that we were making some pretty good income from the HE side. At the same time staff were telling us that actually they pretty much enjoyed teaching the HE students and we found that we were getting more and more of a reputation for it. So the motivation to grow the HE side was no longer simply cash, it was no longer just chasing cash, it was chasing growth but the growth that we were chasing was that which we felt comfortable with and that was the HE side, we'd got staff who increasingly wanted to teach more of it. We were getting increasing demand for our programmes and so we were trying to grow to serve both of those pools if you like.

(Vice-Principal A, Citygate)

The decision to apply to join the HE sector needs to be viewed from the perspective of these longer-term drivers. Becoming an autonomous HE institution would remove the College from what were perceived as restrictive FE Funding Council (FEFC) accountability rules which it was felt placed unreasonable restrictions on growth and investment decisions appertaining to HE income streams. Escaping from the FEFC

would take the College out of the tutelage of ‘control and management’ and place it within what was perceived as a more benign HEFCE regime of ‘funding and commissioning’. But there were also strong market pressures behind becoming an HE College. Remaining as an FE College included a perception of increasing vulnerability to enforce rationalisation of provision through mergers or takeovers across the local city region. These fears were sharpened by the sense that parts of the College’s higher level provision were also tempting targets for certain predatory HE institutions. Apart from one joint programme the College had never taken the franchise route to expanding its HE numbers. Students were in that sense ‘owned’ by the College, its programmes validated by external HEI partners.

Citygate’s transfer strategy, then, represented a response to its developing sense of its HE identity. The epiphany of the initial validation exercises demonstrated the capacity for higher level work but did not of course guarantee that transfer would be an inevitable outcome. Hence the timing of the transfer into HE represented the building of a platform based on years of cumulative experience. Indeed, the interview data suggests that repositioning was only possible because both organisational image and identity had changed commensurately around the notion of becoming a higher education player. In other words, how institutional leaders imagined the organisation reflected the realities of its recent history.

Substance to this argument can be derived from those parts of the interview data that compare the continuities in how the College has dealt with duality during the periods pre- and post transfer. Reflecting on this theme the Vice-Principal (A) observed:

So I can’t describe really the culture if you like and the way the organisation worked when I first arrived as an FE college. It was different. In terms of how that is different now from the current approach, organisationally I’d say that we’re not very different in terms of the organisational culture we’re not very different. There are emphases on different things, there is much more of an emphasis on scholarship than there was, but that’s not since we’ve been an HEI, that’s probably since ‘94 when we really started to develop the degree programmes, the Honours programmes. There’s probably more.....well as an extension to that scholarship there’s more of a focus on promoting research and publication and that is more recent. In terms of the courses that we offer, I mean clearly they’ve changed dramatically but one of the interesting things is that we’ve not really lost much of the FE that we ran, it’s just grown hugely to HE.

Reinforcing these continuities another of the Vice-Principals claimed that Citygate ‘doesn’t recognise the duality in an operational management sense.’ Delivery is split, with groups of staff primarily dedicated either to FE or HE. There is a single contract for staff, but delivery is separated. Management of provision, on the other hand, is integrated. Hence a senior management team takes responsibility for all learning and teaching, while non-academic operational management is similarly responsible for provision across the board. In terms of dealing with different sector based regulatory and inspection regimes all arrangements are handled by the same senior team. Duality in this area was perceived as demanding but not insuperable:

Duality, it is hard work, it does make much more of a difficult job for people like me, it would be far easier doing my job in a single sector institution. But the ability to take what’s best from one part of the organisation, from one sector if you like and see if that can be used in the other sector is tremendously valuable. A lot of the very positive comments that we got out of a very good institutional audit for instance just last year can actually be traced back to the good practice that we developed on the FE side.

(Vice-Principal A, Citygate)

Organisational configurations around the boundary at Citygate are reflected in the spatial separation of provision. For the last few years HE provision has been concentrated in the main or front building to the College. This building also houses the senior leadership tiers and has been designed to present a frontage incorporating some key symbols of curriculum specialisation. Further education courses are located mainly in a separate annex, a building acquired shortly after transfer. There are some overlaps between FE and HE, particularly where FE students need to access practice based facilities in the HE building. But in general the physical separation of FE from HE is complete, with different staff, teaching timetables etc. Since transfer the College has also chosen to build a targeted research culture, though scholarship and knowledge transfer activities, rather than entry into research assessment exercises, is the dominant mode of defining the ‘higherness’ of its HE mission. At the time of the site visit the latter was being further reinforced by pursuit of Taught Degree Awarding Powers (TDAP).

#### *Alternative duality strategies at Pirnmill Bay and Churchtown Colleges*

The two comparator institutions share with Citygate an emphasis on craft traditions but in different subject specialisms. Churchtown College has primary interests in land related subjects, while Pirnmill Bay, retains a long standing focus on art and design.

Apart from their specialist orientations all three cases have a number of other similarities – notably direct funding for their HE work, offers that include foundation and honours degree provision as well as non-prescribed courses, and broader national and even international reputations in several niche areas of their specialist strengths. However, unlike Citygate’s transfer trajectory, both Pirnmill Bay and Churchtown Colleges have retained their FE status despite long histories of HE engagement in certain key markets for vocational provision in core areas of specialism, traditionally through HNDs.

Despite its specialist appellation Pirnmill Bay exhibits a slightly diluted sense of the significance of specialism. Although it retains a strong craft and hence practice-based tradition in art, design and creativity, more recent ‘excursions’ (Principal) into neighbouring specialisms hinted at a wider orientation in the market place, such that the Principal suggested that the College had been in effect ‘mixed economy for quite some years’.

For some years the College’s HE provision has been validated by a local HEI. Relationships with this partner had been based on a fortuitous combination of physical proximity of the two institutions without any obvious competitive art and design overlap, at least within the city region. However, a ‘bubbling issue’ (Head of HE) had eventually surfaced with the HEI’s decision to re-locate its art and design activities into a consolidated new arts faculty in the immediate vicinity of Pirnmill Bay College. The outcome of competitive overlap was ‘divorce’, the HEI believing it had an exclusive relationship with the College, the College determined not to be refused validation of some of its core HE provision.

Pirnmill Bay had never considered itself merely a ‘feeder’ for its HEI partner. However, negotiation of new validation relationship removed the constraints on activities and open competition was now possible. Nevertheless, the College clearly had internal identity problems. The expansion into HE had diluted the clarity of purpose and mission. The Principal emphasised that in terms of funding streams and recruitment strategies Pirnmill Bay ‘relied on FE...’ Despite this:

...all its energies and perceived values in terms of the academic staffing was teaching HE, that was the preferred model and therefore you had this sort of inverted triangle where FE was diminishing and HE was trying to grow but with, you know, an art college who actually depended largely on recruitment from a local sub-regional parochial base.

Principal, Pirnmill Bay College

The outcome was, in the words of the Principal, 'a mission drift from the college over a number of years'. The identity confusion resulting from this drift had impacted on widening participation. Despite a long standing commitment to access or inclusion as part of its mission, the drift towards HE had moved the College towards selective recruitment from a wider regional and national HE pool. 'You had a college six or seven years ago', the Principal observed, 'that was seeking to be highly selective but was a strongly recruiting college and largely in a local sub-regional context [yet] whose staff thought actually it was an elitist HE high profile.' The widening participation imperative of the College was threatened at the same time as FE quality also began to decline culminating in a failed OFSTED inspection.

Internal FE/HE configurations at the College reflected these uncertain identities. Spatially HE had been concentrated largely in one of several city region sites with FE dotted around various annexes. An estates strategy had begun to address the proliferation of sites, though there were still unresolved issues about whether to merge or separate FE from HE complicated by the need to move the College out of its financial problems. Duality had also impeded the implementation of the estates strategy. At the time of the visit the College had not been able to interest the HE Funding Council in investing in a new HE building. While the LSC had shown some interest, the caveat was that it must be investment directed at FE based areas.

In terms of management the College had previously followed a policy of integrating FE and HE. For the Head of HE this arrangement had the advantage of enabling a holistic view of widening participation and progression across the broad range of College provision. Following the change of validating partners however the decision had been taken to develop a more distinctive HE ethos by separating FE and HE. Although the rationale for the split was clear and was intended to facilitate building the systems necessary to satisfy QAA inspection, articulation between FE and HE had

been a casualty of the process. The result of these changes had been a sense of drift, in the words of the HE Manager:

I think we're in a period of transition from one place to another, if I'm completely honest about it.

The need to address the problem of mission drift at Pirnmill Bay would not have been unfamiliar to senior leaders at Churchtown College. In recent years this College had also experienced identity confusion arising from the juxtaposition of HE within an FE setting. The Principal had arrived in post several years ago to find a pressing need to establish precisely the relationship between the institution's image and identity. Despite strong performance in terms of quality in FE provision the College had drifted towards HE without a clear sense of strategic direction and had developed, in the Principal's words, an HE curriculum that was 'unsustainable'.

Although staff had invested heavily in what they perceived to be the right thing, the College had ended up 'believing it was an HE institution' even though it remained in FE. Despite having, in the word of the Principal, large numbers of HE, the primary task for the College was to refocus on its FE roots, a task interpreted by the Principal as delivering strong Level 2/level 3 to 16-18 year olds. 'Nobody had that handle on the core income', the Principal admitted, 'and obviously then the non-core income becomes even more important... You know, it fills a gap somehow.... So what I wanted to do was absolutely reinstate core income and core business.'

With 'grant chasing' frowned on, the notion of core income was closely linked to the sense of identity of the College not just as a specialist land resource institution but as one that imagined itself firmly as FE. The Principal was unequivocal on this point:

I believe fundamentally in us being an FE college, delivering very good quality HE but in an FE college, it's a further education institution and I won't have it said any other. Because anybody who comes here to do HE must understand what they're getting and what the strengths of that are. I'm not apologetic for it, I think it gives them things that they would not get. But there may be need of HEI and if that's what they want they must go to one because they can't pretend it's us here, and I'm very clear on that.

(Principal Churchtown College)

The rationale for restating and reaffirming an FE College status however was not driven solely by the importance of matching the image of provision and identity with the reality of core income streams. Rather than an FE-HE duality, the process was driven by the need to develop a separate HE strategy alongside a new 14-19 strategy. This led to a decision to separate HE from other provision. A dedicated HE building was created designed to act as a ‘very clear statement of “It is a HE centre”’ symbolised in the absence of any FE students being taught there and 24 hour access restricted to degree students with the necessary swipe cards. Ownership of the respective strategies was further reinforced by allocating dedicated HE staff into a different management structure, line managed by the Head of HE rather than by FE Heads of Department.

### *Summary*

Three specialist Colleges, each with complex empirical realities have been used to illustrate a particular type of boundary encounter. For one, Citygate, transition into dual-sector provision had resulted in a decision to reposition in the market through formal transfer from FE to HE status. The primary drivers of transfer were easier access to resources and control over directions of growth which align rather well with competence and efficiency concepts of the dual-sector boundary. Neither Pirmill Bay nor Churchtown Colleges have chosen to follow this route. Both these colleges had experienced a dilution of FE identity as HE expanded. Like Citygate both have also moved to create a separate sense of HE identity and space. Churchtown has sought to do this within a restated sense of sector identity as an FE institution. Pirmill Bay, less clear of its sector identity, is struggling to find a new expression of identity. Yet for all three institutions, arguably, duality is problematic. Whether transferring out, consolidating in or sliding between the FE and HE, none of the Colleges found being in some way dual sector an effective substitute for a sector allegiance. On the contrary, hybridity was experienced as an uncomfortable state.

### **3. Merger: barriers, hybridities and strategies won and lost at Southleigh University and Haleoak College**

The present landscape of institutions that comprise the English system of mass higher education is very much the product of overlapping drivers, of which the process of

institutional merger or amalgamation is one of the most important. Until the Robbins Report of 1963 higher education in Britain as a whole was generally not conceived as a single entity or system but as a 'diverse collection of *ad hoc* institutions brought into existence at different times by different promoters to meet different needs and purposes' (Perkin 1969: 35).

The process of merger has a long history and in the English case at least has been an instrumental part of the blurring over time of sector boundaries. For example, the institutions known collectively as the English civic universities owe their origins to the symbiosis of industrial wealth and civic pride of the great Victorian provincial cities. Most rose by stages from collections of independent colleges founded during the second half of the nineteenth century into consolidated university institutions. A classic case is the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology which, before its recent merger with the Victoria University of Manchester was the direct lineal descendent of some of the city's Mechanics Institutes, several of which went on to become technical colleges (Perkin 1969: 42).

Over time, institutions with roots in the sprawling sector of technical education could progress, usually through some form of combination with other institutions, to full university status. The pool of institutions with potential to combine or merge in this way grew considerably in the twentieth century. By the early 1960s this non-university or technical education sector comprised more than 300 colleges in England and Wales which, when added to the 15 Scottish central institutions, contained around 35,000 students taking full-time advanced courses and nearly 72,000 taking part-time equivalent courses. By this time, the proportion of students taking both full- and part-time degree or other advanced courses in all types of non-university institutions had risen to over 55 per cent of the total in British higher education (Perkin 1969: 41). Over time, this 'public' higher education sector has also been a major source of upward mobility from non-university to new university institutions, a trend that was both envisaged and encouraged by the Robbins Committee.

Historically therefore mergers have been and remain one of the key ingredients in institutional fluidity between and across the sectoral divide between further and higher education. However, mergers have been prompted by varying causes. Some have

been forced by governments anxious to deal with ‘problem’ cases, such as non-viable, small or fragmented institutions, by combining them or encouraging take-overs by larger institutions (Harman and Harman 2007). In addition to being a tool of governments anxious to shape systems (and reducing costs), mergers have also been sources of competitive or strategic advantage. Such mergers help both strong and weak institutions to adjust their positions in relation to changing environmental circumstances and opportunities, build identities, academic programmes and financial resources (Harman and Harman 2007).

The importance of different forms of institutional collaboration in contemporary higher education is widely recognised. There is a spectrum of such collaborations ranging from informal at one end to formal at the other, the latter including full mergers resulting in unitary or federal structures. Despite an extensive literature of mergers, including in higher education systems (see Harman and Harman 2007), there have been few studies investigating the relationship between mergers and their impact on dual- or mixed economy institutions. The cases reported in this section address this purpose as well as the broader project questions set out above.

The aim in bringing the cases together is not to focus extensively on the inside story of the mergers *per se*, but on their significance as a form of transition across the FE-HE boundary. We wish to compare and contrast any differences arising from vertical and horizontal mergers in particular. Although the rationales for mergers appear in the narratives of the senior leaders interviewed, following Harman and Harman (2007) the focus of the case studies is oriented more to the results or impact of merger and the challenges of bringing institutional cultures together. How have organisational orientations and configurations around the boundary been influenced by these mergers? Is there any evidence to suggest that mergers around or across FE and HE create any specific problems in relation to boundary encounters compared to the other models? These questions are intended to form a running commentary through the ensuing case study descriptions and analyses.

#### *Southleigh – further-higher hybrid or parallel ‘universities’?*

Southleigh was referred to by informants at all levels as a ‘merged institution’ whose roots extend back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Designated a College of Higher Education in

the 1960s and later a polytechnic and then university, its more recent shape and structure reflects several mergers and amalgamations. In 2004 the University amalgamated with a College which was itself the product of an earlier merger between two separate institutions, one specialising in art and design, the other a general FE College. The amalgamation with the College brought to the University a general FE element (including technology which the University did not have and became a new Faculty); specialist art and design provision which, with teacher training, was the predominant element in the College's HE; and a 14-19 strand on a separate site. The outcome was an institution with three main campuses with numerous and geographically dispersed operating sites.

Since early 2004 the merged and enlarged Southleigh University had designated itself explicitly as a further-higher or 'dual-sector' institution. At issue post-merger is how the new dual-sector identity might be realised in terms of its shape, structure, identity and working practices. Ambiguities about how the concept of dual-sector has been imagined were further reflected in how best to add value from the different strengths of the 'acquired' colleges. The challenge was to articulate a vision and strategy to coalesce these diverse elements into not just a single unitary structure but somehow to create around this structure an identity as something distinctively 'dual-sector' within a university setting.

The risk arising from the mergers was the formation not of a genuinely 'dual-sector' entity, but a series of parallel, dispersed, semi-autonomous organisations sharing the title of a 'university' but not a conventional identity – the creation in effect of not one identity, but a series of 'parallel universities'. The interviews with senior executives revealed some consensus around the nature of the challenge and the distance still to be travelled: 'a work in progress' as it was documented more recently. Not surprisingly perhaps there were some divergent views about the direction of travel, references to contrasting loyalties and expectations and, more critically, a concern that the merged University lacked clear strategies for how to transform itself into a genuinely dual-sector institution.

To understand these dilemmas it is necessary to unpack the place of progression within the vision for a new and enlarged, but essentially different, form of university.

From the perspective of the former College there was already considerable experience and expertise in relation to working across the further-higher boundary. For example, prior to merger the College already had over 1,000 ftes on courses accredited by five HE partner institutions. Although directly funded for much of this provision, working across the different procedures associated with five different partners was thought to be a constraining factor to continued expansion of HE provision to meet market demand. At corporate level, this realisation switched attention from a strategy of multiple partnerships to a search for a more strategic relationship with a single partner, perhaps even a merger. Discussions ensued with two possible suitors, one of which was Southleigh University. One of the key attractions of the latter was its track record of working not just in FE through its own contracts but its subject specialisms in complementary fields.

The case for merger was further strengthened by a shared belief in the rationale of enhancing progression. As one of the former College leaders reflected:

we were really passionate at [College] at the time about our two plus one models and progression from further education into the two, which was the HND plus the one which was the degree top up and we were really developing that quite strongly.

The faith in progression was built, in part at least, by an established track record of progression from Level 3 to 4 prior to merger. The rhetoric that merger across the further-higher boundary would increase progression was not without some foundation and promised possible improvements not just where vocational routes had previously existed without an internal progression route but in the case of 14-19 ‘academic’ provision.

However, although a commitment to a progression model was one of the founding principles of merger, the interviews reflected a sense of disappointment that the rhetoric had failed to materialise in practice. Bringing HE and FE alongside each other within a combined institution did not in itself improve anything or add value unless it improved progression. However, it was evident that a blurring had occurred in the rhetoric, demonstrated in various committees, groups, policies and academic board, about just what was meant by ‘internal’ progression. Furthermore, as respondents admitted, the focus on improving internal progression could raise

conflicts of interest between student and institutional interests. As the Vice-Principal (A) explained:

I would personally agree...there are students for whom progression is a good idea and those for whom going out and working full time might be the best option for the next five years and then coming back. Or indeed you happen to know that they would be better off doing something at another institution. I mean people have sometimes asked me about doing a PhD and I've discussed it and directed them to other institutions, either because I know there is a body of research and research supervisors somewhere that might match their needs better. So I think when it comes down to advising people teaching students people engage via their own moral code rather than the fact that we are a dual sector institution committed to internal student progression.

The dilemma of internal progression was difficult to avoid, however, precisely because it could manifest itself in so many different models, diverting some students from higher status institutions perhaps, whilst simultaneously providing a ladder for those who may otherwise slip through the participation net. The same respondent expressed the institutional dilemmas involved when progression purposes were compared with progression performance:

I think what we need to be focusing on more...is to ensure that there is nothing as a barrier which is preventing students from progressing through the system, we are ensuring that we are aligning the curriculum as far as we can but we...it isn't a terrible shock to suddenly be level 4 or become an undergraduate student, we are trying to make that transition as smooth as possible and so almost as if students suddenly don't realise it but the fact that for the last three months they've been doing higher education work. But I think we can do quite a lot around that area without necessarily abandoning our beliefs because the progression rate is so poor suggests that there are very basic things wrong such as a lack of information, such as a lack of maybe firm offers coming in to students progressing to the courses within the institution.

Senior executives admitted that progression rates 'are terrible' though were unclear on a strategy to deal with the dilemmas involved. Building an academic structure that worked had been a complicated process and implementing a coherent plan for progression had been somewhat stifled. Although the University had integrated the academic structure into FE/HE vocational Faculties (excluding 14-19 academic which somewhat perversely included responsibility for Access courses), the Faculties were largely managed at senior level from one of the campus sites. Heads of Faculties were critical players in making the structure work.

One possible strategic route, which found favour among some colleagues in the institution, was to establish a better positioning in the traditional market for brighter students, effectively using the new acquisitions as enhanced or internal feeder routes from further into higher levels of study. An alternative strategy was to redefine the University's place and image in the market in more radical terms. One element in this would be to position a dual-sector identity alongside closer business engagement, developing traditional markets where feasible, but focusing more on new, vocationally-oriented, markets for participation and progression. In the latter vision progression would not be merely an outcome of closer internal further-higher articulation, but the embodiment of one of the original rationales for merger across the boundary. Without a step change in internal progression, it was argued, there would be little to commend merger other than being able to point to some economies of scale and better access to funding opportunities.

More rarely articulated, both as a rationale for progression and justification of being dual-sector, was a social inclusion narrative. In Senate and more generally across the institution, an essentially economic rationale had become more salient, with progression being seen primarily as a route to increasing numbers and funding. In concrete terms the merged institution was being squeezed by sometimes incompatible targets. For example, in the sixth-form academy section of the organisation, competition with local schools and a strong focus on getting students into other universities was driving in one direction. In the university 'proper', there was demand for and focus on attracting external recruits. The progression narrative was multi-faceted and had produced some unintended consequences. Creating a new identity and image as a dual-sector institution had become embroiled in these progression dilemmas.

However, underlying the progression problem were some deeper tensions associated with Southleigh's higher education inheritance. Born of the 1992 abolition of the binary divide in UK higher education, its mission had traditionally reflected its polytechnic traditions, expressed in its simplest form as a strong orientation to teaching, but with an attendant problem of how best to engage in and fund research. At corporate level there was a drive to strengthen and extend research capacity and

performance in certain core areas. However, bringing further and higher education practices around teaching and research post-merger had been exacerbated by what one described as ‘a really interesting clash of cultures’. The problem was exemplified in the distinctive arrangements for developing practice associated with the Teaching Fellowship Scheme, on the higher education side, and the Advanced Practitioner Scheme, on the further education side. As the Vice-Principal (A) explained, the former Scheme:

...conceives of excellent teaching in terms of reflective practice, in terms of lecturers doing pedagogy research as being advisers and guides and people that could be looked upon as sources of support within a faculty. On the other hand, the Advanced Practitioners on the further education side are essentially there to help people ensure that they meet the expectations of the Ofsted inspection, they are very much a managerial tool to ensure that people are starting and ending their lessons on time and that they improve their teaching practice according to classroom observation protocols, so they are much more narrowly configured. So at the moment, struggling, we are trying to bring these two things together. And I’ve argued that if we can’t do that we’re not much of a dual sector institution. But that’s a huge challenge.

(Vice-Principal A, Southleigh)

Building bridges across these cultural divisions involved broader considerations of how to connect leadership with academic structures and systems. Problems were cited in relation to quality assurance, professional development, research and scholarship and learner support. Critical for an institution based heavily on its teaching mission, control of learning and teaching had become problematic because it was essentially decentralised and devolved to both the former colleges and other internal operating units. Moving to a centralised system was desirable, but would have necessitated challenging existing structures, a move that was described by one respondent as nothing less than ‘another suicide note’ unless and until the University had addressed the broader question of developing a more robust system of centralised academic governance. Without a central learning and teaching committee or embedded strategy for the institution as a whole, existing arrangements had become further entrenched in the former college where, arguably, there was already strong opposition to developing unitary structures across the further-higher boundary in general.

However, opposition to integration was articulated in a context of perceived quality weaknesses in various parts of the merged institution as viewed from both sides of the boundary divide. From the FE side, decentralised structures were represented as the most effective approach to asserting control over teaching quality. The argument was that they enabled the imposition, at both site and course level, of fairly prescriptive staff development and training regimes. Closer integration of FE and HE methodologies was also challenged by the persistence of contractual differences between academic staff. At the time of the study there were notionally three forms of contract – further, higher and hybrid – reflecting not just differences in total teaching hours, but assumptions about engagement in scholarly activities. ‘You have people on very different contracts’, one respondent observed:

so one of the tensions for us is if we introduce things about research in academic life and research skills people at [campus], a number of people at [campus], are very interested and they sometimes say to me “am I going to be allowed to do research” and my answer to that is going to be “well you need to talk to your line manager or the Dean about what you’re doing” so there is an ambiguity about the depths to which we are getting staff to do the same....when we see them as developing a profile around research as well as teaching. I don’t think that’s strong on the FE side.

(Vice-Principal A, Southleigh)

Senior executives expressed the view that a great deal of effort had gone into creating structures to forge integration and centralised approaches across the further-higher boundary. Notwithstanding the effort, however, it was felt that change had been blocked because of the strength of the identities and cultures brought from the Colleges. One respondent claimed that such was the strength of these residual site identities that staff had been able ‘to escape back into their pockets of activity and procedures’.

Asking embarrassing questions about the meaning of dual-sector, challenging the Faculties about their plans and practices in relation to duality, was identified by one respondent as a critical ingredient in senior leadership. To be successful, however, the challenges had to be accompanied by appropriate structures and drive from the top. Some respondents were critical of progress to date, their efforts apparently hampered by the absence of robust strategic planning frameworks and suitable

structures to facilitate change and build an identifiable dual-sector brand. Structural deficiencies were writ large in the Faculties, where it was held that lines of communication and management were sometimes weak or lacking. Part of the reason for these deficiencies was not merely related to any inadequacies of leadership or structures, but reflected a more systemic failure at corporate level to think through and appreciate the cultural and operational differences separating HE from FE. The last word on this subject is from the Vice-Principal A who reflected:

We didn't spot these barriers really. These are the ones that have actually worked out to take up a lot of internal time and energy, to get people to explain, get people to understand, to get people to engage with the different requirements of the sector. Because they were coming to these things and they were sort of shrouding these things in the coat that they know ... that has been quite a barrier. It's a hard to pin down and define accurately barrier, but I would put that as probably one of the biggest barriers because of the time its required us to spend on internalised things rather than on getting out there and doing. We've dissipated a lot of energy if you like on tackling that, so I put that down as a big barrier.

*Haleoak: a 'new model' of FE and HE configuration?*

The second case study of amalgamation presents an apparently more straightforward example of horizontal mergers between non-university institutions. Haleoak is a further education College spread across several sites. Its current configuration reflects a previous amalgamation in the late 1970s between two previously separate institutions, one predominantly FE the other predominantly HE, and a second merger with another FE college in 2002. In its combined form the institution is one of the largest general FE Colleges in the region, now with four distributed sites. In terms of HE provision the earlier merger had been the most significant since it brought into the College a provider exclusively engaged in higher and professional/continuing education. However, this provision had declined gradually over the years taking a sudden dip around the time of the 2002 merger. The post-2002 College came into existence therefore needing to address this decline in funding from its core HE activities at the same time as creating a new set of structures to meld the constituent parts of the amalgamated institution together.

The model adopted was to appoint Vice-Principals who initially were responsible for the four main physical entities of the College and who worked with the Principal,

Deputy Principal and service directorates as the College executive. After a couple of years this distributed model was replaced by a matrix structure in which the four College Vice-Principals were given responsibility for Schools. The aim was to bring cross site responsibility for cognate curriculum areas, including levels – HE and 14-16. This is the current model, with head of site now effectively no more than a ‘symbolic role’ (Principal).

Although the integration of levels across curricula rather than site was considered a key part of post-merger consolidation the College faced a key decision about what to do about its declining HE presence. Much of the decline was put down to growing competition, particularly with local HEIs, and the absence of a clear strategy for where the College wanted to take its HE. This had initiated a searching 12-month review during 2005-06 ‘about our strategy and identity and ambitions around higher education.... looking at the mission of the college, looking at the vocational areas and foundation degrees very, very significantly, and gaps in provision which the College could feel that they could plug.’ (Principal). The outcome was a new HE strategy, approved by the College Corporation, focused on:

localised progression, foundation degrees, linking in partnership with local employers but also recognising that we can’t deliver an expansion in higher education in isolation, it’s either through partnership or franchise arrangements with some of the partners.

(Principal, Haleoak)

Although still in its initial phase the new strategy has been credited with helping to stabilise the longer-term decline in activity and achieve some modest growth in numbers. Most HE provision is concentrated on one site, though there is a strategy to develop relevant courses catering for specific markets at other sites. Even on this site, however, HE is physically separate from FE, occupying one floor. HE students have access to a separate HE learning resource centre, a ‘social’ room and are provided with separate social activities, including a Freshers’ Week. Nevertheless, staff at this and, where relevant, the other sites teach across all levels and are managed within subject areas.

It is clear that respondents in this case study considered that the merged institution had gradually got to grips with the impact of amalgamation and had forged an

organisational structure that worked. Indeed, the Principal was of the view that the new structure reinforced the strategic decision to reinvigorate the College's commitment to working across further-higher and to do so in ways that constituted a new direction. 'It's not more of the same, it's not reviving the old model', it was observed, but:

...it's looking at the realities of the new world, the needs of the students, and the opportunities afforded within FE and an HE configuration in [this City]. Because as you know, [this City] is very needy, hungry, in terms of the higher skills and part of that is certainly even more going forward - part of our sort of key imperative. [People in this City] need to feel and have part of the economic dividend which is being part of a vibrant global economy which is [this City] and that's very, very important to us.

The HE strategy, therefore, reflected an explicit attempt to position provision in relation to the city-regional economy and to locate it physically in a differentiated way. Hence, one site would offer the bulk of HE provision and cater for a broader area, while the remaining three would concentrate primarily on locally-focused provision. It was recognised however that this dispersal would potentially create difficulties in terms of access to HE-specific facilities and resources.

Another key driver of the strategy, familiar in several of our other case studies, was to decrease reliance on LSC income. Hence HE was one of several areas targeted for development including 14-16 education, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Employer Engagement and International Programmes. The goal was to maintain a combination of both directly funded courses alongside formal franchise and validation partnerships with several universities. Additionally the College provides courses under the Edexcel label though it had also decided to replace HNDs with Foundation Degrees.

Responsibility for driving the strategy across the institution was the responsibility of one of the Curriculum/Site Vice-Principals. A recently appointed full-time post of HE coordinator had been added to focus on operational matters. In addition the College had established an HE Coordinating Group. This is chaired by the Vice-Principal (or the HE Coordinator) and meets monthly. It includes managers from the vocational areas and is also attended by the teaching staff. The expectation is that ideas for new

provision will be developed here and then taken (by the Vice-Principal) to the Senior Management Team and to Corporation as appropriate. Other members of the Group include staff from marketing and there is a well developed programme of internal and external marketing specific to HE provision with a very strong emphasis on progression internally – including from EFL courses for international students and ESOL for local students. Finally, arrangements for ensuring quality are handled by a Quality and Standards Group (rather than Academic Board) and any relevant issues are reported to this central body. There is no apparent separation of the HE quality assurance from the mainstream other than at the level required by validating HEI regulations (see below).

The perceptions of respondents indicated that the relationship between strategy and structure is proving effective – with a single lead for HE at a senior level and a Coordinator, but otherwise HE being integrated within the college structures of management and governance. For the Principal, the post-merger structural changes were considered to have been ‘spectacularly successful’. The rationale had been to shift the locus of academic coordination to the highest level:

If you can imagine ESOL previously or Science or Business or IT courses, they tended to be separately managed with some attempted co-ordination across the site at a medium or junior level. Now you’ve got senior managers who are responsible for, example, Science across the curriculum, so we’ve got three sixth form centres managed by one senior manager across the site. We’ve got all of our ESOL courses across the site and what they’ve actually done is brought shared practices, shared experiences and shared quality, and that was for me one of the key instigators in terms of putting us in a position to gain [award of excellence] status.

(Principal, Haleoak College)

It may be that the expansion of HE into other sites will provide challenges, but this would not differ from the management of other provision which is duplicated across the sites (though much is not). Certainly the Vice-Principal responsible for HE reported few problems in managing developments through the HE Coordinating Group, which includes managers as well as course leaders.

Working with several HEIs means that quality assurance systems differ by course, with Course Directors from the relevant HEI sitting on the Exams Board. The move

from Edexcel HNDs to FDs has meant a move from external moderators to external examiners. This range of relationships does not, however, create significant issues. The College has undergone a very successful inspection recently and considers its own QA processes are 'robust', with HE and FE systems approached on an integrated basis.

In terms of positioning in the market place the College appears to have identified a clear sense of its advantages and selling points. Small class sizes, individual attention and personal support are emphasised in its publicity, alongside opportunities for progression, either into employment or third year of study in partner HEIs. The College's strong links with partners are used to reinforce the progression message. To this mix is also added a price incentive, with lower fixed fees being offered than those available in competing institutions. Indeed, low fees are a key strategic principle with the College indicating that it would refuse to enter or withdraw from any franchise or validation relationships that could not maintain the low fee.

There is a very strong focus on the benefits of local collaboration: with schools in the 14-19 partnership; with other college across the sub-region; and, with colleges and HEIs within the local lifelong learning network. This network, as the Head of HE observed, had reinvigorated wider relationships and activities:

Actually, I think it is brilliant that we've got these networks because it certainly has really pulled FE colleges together for their HE provision, as well in a way that it's not seen quite as competitive.

In this case site duality or becoming in some sense dual-sector or hybrid was not seen as a primary issue. Despite the stresses of merger the College had managed to maintain and enhance its sense of identity, developed a strategy for working across the further-higher boundary and begun to implement several partnership based activities. For the future, the vision articulated by the Principal was a form of vocational HE firmly anchored in a further to higher education progression model and contextualised within the city-region:

You can't be a serious further education training provider in [this City] without actually having higher education as part of the agenda because the economy and the labour market needs more of our learners, young and old, to gain access to Level 3 and above. And certainly we recognise we need to do more on that.

### *Summary*

Two cases of merger have been presented which have amalgamated formerly separate institutions into unitary entities, in each case extending engagement around the further-higher boundary. The first, Southleigh University, involved *vertical* amalgamation across the boundary involving a higher education institution merging with two colleges in further education. The latter had themselves merged previously with other institutions to extend their own operations from further into higher education. The narrative in the Southleigh case has focused on the challenges of developing a new structure where vertical integration has brought institutions together whose home bases had been in different sectors. However, in the absence of a common framework to reshape its community Southleigh University had made only limited progress towards countering the tendencies of disparate units to maintain the *status quo ante*.

Protection of pre-existing sector identities, together with the somewhat stilted progress towards a distinctive dual-sector brand, contrasts in several ways with the experiences of mergers at Haleoak College. Like Southleigh, this institution was the product of several amalgamations of colleges straddling both further and higher education. As such it too had faced not insubstantial challenges in terms of forging a common institutional identity and brand. Here, however, the trajectory across the further-higher boundary appears to have been eased by the strong attachment to an FE sector identity. Unlike Southleigh therefore, the transition into duality at Haleoak had been used as an instrumental part of institutional building and had had a generally less corrosive effect on established identity. Nevertheless, transition at each case study has offered slightly different trajectories, configurations and dispositions around the dual-sector boundary. Although histories of merger are important in both cases, neither rationales nor strategies link in a simple or linear relationship with operational practices or outcomes.

#### **4 Disaggregation and decoupling: separating duality at Northgreen, East Heath and Greenton Colleges**

The final model, based on organisational separation and decoupling, exemplifies the sometimes complex empirical intermingling of transitions around the further-higher boundary. In its simplest form organisational disaggregation denotes some form of separation. In the wider corporate economy *disaggregation* is a process that has been seen as instrumental in helping organisations to downsize and refocus their activities in order to work in smaller and more autonomous units. The aim of such organisational re-design is to enable both internal (within-firm) and external (between-firm) exchanges through a complex mix of market and hierarchical elements. Corporate disaggregation is generally seen as a response to performance incentives that are facilitated by information technology, for instance.

Although these wider corporate trends in knowledge-intensive industries provide a wider backdrop, it is apparent that there is a continuum representing many different forms of disaggregation. At one extreme, it is possible to conceive of it as separation or formal demerger. Here a new boundary is introduced because activities that were previously handled internally or within-firm are formally disaggregated into a new entity which removes activities into an external or between-firm arrangement. Towards the other end of the continuum may be strategic attempts to provide a range of different relationship arrangements within-firm. Exchanges remain internal but are of different kinds and intensities. We have adopted the term decoupling to describe these intermediate dimensions of disaggregation.

In organisation theory one of the most important works on organisational decoupling derives from the work of Meyer and Rowan (1977) who distinguished the formal structures, policies, plans and programmes of organizations from their ongoing practices and routines. On the basis of research into educational institutions they argued that the adopted standards and procedures designed to address government policies and wider stakeholder demands could be decoupled from everyday routines of teaching and administration. Decoupling in this way, they argued, protected internal routines from the uncertainties of the external environment at the same time

as preserving legitimacy with stakeholders (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Following these insights, the argument is that the decoupling perspective illuminates a different trajectory or transition around the further-higher boundary.

In two of our final three case studies, the institutions have created new within- or between-firm relationships in order to decouple the external pressures associated with hybridity or duality from the everyday routines of organisational life. These cases exemplify different intensities of decoupling. Northgreen College has attempted to forge a new federal college structure which decentralises much to the constituent 'Colleges' whilst keeping key strategic elements of HE at the centre. East Heath College, on the other hand, has struggled to keep its FE and HE within a unitary structure, despite some internal decoupling. The response has been to pursue a strategy of institutional disaggregation into two new entities based on separated, rather than dual, FE and HE. The final case presents something of a hybrid. Following merger activities, Greenton College has been living for some time with its HE partially decoupled from its FE and is actively looking for ways to articulate between the two spheres of activity in ways that will work from an organisational and operational point of view. Rather than decoupling, therefore, the institution is looking to find a strategy to enable within-firm re-coupling across the further-higher boundary.

*Northgreen College: a federal institution, not 'trying to be a university'?*

Northgreen is a large College of Further Education. Its HE provision as a proportion of overall FE activity is small, though in absolute terms the HE student headcount places the College in Band 2 (medium) category. The College recruits heavily from within its city-region including several disadvantaged areas where post-compulsory educational participation and achievement are low. Although the College is the principal provider of FE in the City, several neighbouring universities also offer a wide range of HE opportunities.

The dominance of the College in the FE market reflects a recent history of consolidation in FE provision across the City. Prior to 1988 there were four local authority controlled colleges covering the area providing mainly vocational education

and training opportunities combined with varying amounts of more traditional academic qualification routes, mainly offered part-time and in the evenings. Northgreen was in effect a 'new' tertiary college formed out of consolidating the existing colleges. Although two new colleges were formed, subsequently all were amalgamated into a single College in 1993. In its current form the College is portrayed as a federal structure with three main constituent Colleges working across seven sites distributed across the City, their identities strongly linked with the names of their locales.

Of these Tultry College was described by its Vice-Principal as 'the vocational heart of the [federal] College', with a profile of learners heavily weighted towards entry Levels 1 and 2 progressing onto Level 3. This provision is seen as traditional FE in areas such as Engineering, Hairdressing, Therapy, Hospitality, Catering, Health, Social Care, Childcare, together with some more specialised areas such as vocational Sciences. Elements of HE provision are also provided in some of these areas offering chances of progression to HNDs and Foundation Degrees.

Rosham College, in contrast, was described as rather closer to a sixth form with 'significant numbers of 16-18 year olds of whom about a third were studying on A-level courses, the remainder mainly recruited to work-related courses in areas such as Sport and Leisure, Art and Design, IT and Business – work-related but not necessarily directly vocational. Like Tultry several of these areas offered progression opportunities to HND and Foundation Degrees.

The third main constituent – Asterthorpe College – was described as offering provision lying somewhere between the other two. Like Rosham it is basically a 16-19 College offering a combination of academic and work-related courses, with some vocational and adult education too. However, it was noted that the balance of activities, especially at Asterthorpe and Tultry, was changing 'as LSC change their priorities and what we've normally regarded as adult education fades away in the College.' The relative decline of what might be described broadly as an 'equity' agenda in face of the ascent of the 'skills' agenda is considered further below. Provision for HE needs to be interpreted in this light.

The route to a federal three-college structure was somewhat unusual. Although the Principal emphasised that ‘the use of the words “centralised” and “decentralised” or “federal” requires very, very clear definition’, the sequence of events meant that before 2000 the institution had grown through a process of mergers into what ‘one might roughly call...a centralised college’ (Principal). However, a poor set of inspection reports for the recently consolidated College in 2000 brought a fundamental review of post-16 provision across the City. This review was the prelude to a subsequent organisational restructuring. Prior to this the managers responsible for each subject area would be located at one site but would carry cross-city functional responsibility for their area even when taught on other sites. The Principal, who took over shortly after the results of the fundamental review were known, was far from enamoured by this arrangement:

I was assured when I arrived that this led to the sharing of good practice that meant that the very big strong [subject example] team led across the city, shared good practice and therefore it was a very effective way of managing the college, and my reply was “what was its grade”. And it wasn’t a 1, it may have been a 2, it may have been a 3 but it didn’t seem to warrant the resource allocation to my mind

Although firmly FE in identity, the centralised College of that period had also accumulated HE provision across a range of curriculum areas, albeit with modest recruitment in some. Like FE it was dispersed across the numerous city sites. Although the marketing and presentation of the HE programmes was, according to the Principal, impressive:

...the reality was that we had an expensive provision with modest performance, confused strategy and confused organisational structure.

The Principal was also concerned that the budget for the management of HE appeared to be far higher than the income warranted and found it difficult to understand the rationale for managerial responsibilities. With multiple stakeholders to satisfy across both FE and HE courses, together with a series of action plans to deliver, a radical organisational re-structuring was implemented. The outcome was to ditch the relatively short-lived concept of a centralised College, albeit distributed across numerous sites, and replace it with a federal model based on the three constituent

Colleges described above. These in effect comprised a series of decoupled ‘semi-autonomous management units’ and a ‘better deployment of resources’ (Principal).

One of the main aims of decoupling was to provide students across the various sites with ‘a coherent organisation base’ and thereby help in building identity around the decentralised ‘College’ sites. This arrangement reflected how students themselves tended to experience life at the Colleges:

They never said they went to the [Northgreen] College they always said they went to [Asterthorpe] or to [Tultry] or to [Rosham], so I think that was a significant contribution I made.

(Principal, Northgreen College)

Underpinning the decoupling was an attempt not just to reinforce existing identities, but to clarify student market segments. This process was led by an explicit marketing focus which asked some fundamental questions:

How did we segment our markets, were our activities aligned to our market segments, what was the purpose of [Tultry] College, how was that different from [Rosham] or from [Asterthorpe] or did we just replicate everything in three locations, were we a general further education college on all three sites; was one a sixth form college and another not...[?]

(Principal, Northgreen College)

This exercise was considered valuable in orienting the decoupled organisation to three categories of market: ‘preparing’ for work, ‘in’ work, ‘returning’ to work:

...anybody who was preparing for a job either directly from the college or via HE would be preparing for work; in work would be those who had been trained in the workforce on one day release or were coming to college to update their skills; and the return to work were those who had been out of work for a period for whatever reasons and were returning to work, sometimes with emotional difficulties or lack of skills or whatever.

(Principal, Northgreen College)

These segments were then mapped onto the semi-autonomous Colleges:

So we then began to consider what was the purpose of Asterthorpe. Well in many ways it was fundamentally preparing for work and ultimately Rosham became preparing for work. You might call them sixth form colleges but that was the kind of ideal, while Tultry was preparing for work, in work and returning to work. And you could then align the Student Services and the

Careers Counselling and Advice much more specifically for the market segment that you had. So university entrants and so on a much bigger focus at Rosham and Asterthorpe than at Tultry, employment related stuff at Tultry.  
(Principal, Northgreen College)

One of the advantages claimed for the federal structure was that it would enable the federal Colleges to access a higher level of support and infrastructure services than could be sustained as separate or stand-alone institutions. Hence marketing, publicity, IT, HR and Finance, were provided at corporate level. Responsibility for cross-cutting strategic developments was also retained at federal or corporate level. In the case of HE, this decoupling of strategic responsibility at the centre from operational delivery in the Colleges has proved to be challenging. The problem has several different facets. According to Vice-Principal A, a role designed to provide corporate leadership for HE, the identity and culture of the College was strongly oriented towards FE. Higher education, it was suggested, had arrived as ‘a bit of an afterthought’ and:

... has been separate but we don't look upon it in planning terms as something separate, and certainly the push from me in planning terms is to integrate the HE planning into the FE planning so that the local colleges take a whole view of what they're planning and not just an FE view which has been the case to some extent in the past. Although it may be looked up as separate to a certain extent, the real drive is to look at the integrated....[picture]

Notwithstanding the salience of the FE culture, however:

The three colleges historically had an HE programme. They're taking it far more seriously in terms of their priorities nowadays. They wouldn't want to lose it. It would be expensive also to put it in one place and strategically we'd be going down a different path altogether if we did that. But I do recognise that it makes it very difficult to develop an HE culture in the three colleges. And so it's swings and roundabouts to some extent. But we've gone through a federal model, we've gone for keeping HE in all three colleges

(Vice-Principal A, Northgreen College)

To illustrate the problem reference was made by several respondents not just to the difficulty of decoupling strategic responsibility from the operational aspects of different sites and curricula but the nature of the mix of competitive and collaborative relationships with local HE players. ‘You had to query’, the Principal recalled, ‘why did a college in a city the size of [City] that already had two or three universities,

however one counted them, need also to run HE courses.’ The answer was ultimately distilled into two core purposes:

One was access but it obviously had to be a little bit more than geographical access because the city isn’t that big and therefore you should be able to get into an HE provider. We didn’t really cover geographical areas that the university didn’t although we did have an adult and community infrastructure and therefore accessibility in terms of accessing a college that might be more sympathetic or be perceived by certain groups of students as more welcoming than a large university with a different culture. There may be an issue about access and we worked hard to articulate that.... And then the second issue would be that it was a natural progression of some of our vocational curriculum. And I think that was about it. Those were the two reasons that we built the strategy around.

(Principal Northgreen College)

Translating the strategy into an environment and ethos that resembled a higher education institution has been challenging in terms of providing resources that students and staff perceived to be necessary in a university-like environment. For the Principal, trying to recreate such an environment was unrealistic: ‘Why would we’, he conjectured, ‘because there were two better ones in the city...’ He continued:

we weren’t trying to be a university, we were trying to offer access and vocational HE and that was it, and therefore if I was questioned by inspectors my answer always used to be “but that’s not what we’re about.” But we’re not going to say [Asterthorpe] is the only HE centre because it would never become....you would never get a good student questionnaire report from [Asterthorpe] even if we made it the HE establishment because it would never be a [X University] and it would never be a University of [Y] - it could never be.

Rather than head-on competition, therefore, the federal College opted to redefine its strategic relationship with one of the two local HEIs. Historically this relationship had been conducted within a regional associate college framework, led by the neighbouring post-1992 University. Despite investing a lot of time in the relationship, the candid view of Vice-Principal A was: ‘It hasn’t worked until fairly recently.’ To get it to work the College adopted what were admitted to be ‘some fairly drastic measures’. The Vice-Principal explained:

we were just treated as an associate college and I used to go along to associate college meetings at [X University] and it crystallised in one particular meeting for me, one college Principal took up 50 per cent of the meeting and I asked her afterwards how many students she’d got with [X University] “Oh I don’t

have any this year”; and it kind of just hit me between the eyes that.... I knew I was wasting my time....so when we got the associate college agreement about a year ago, because it was renewable every year, we sent it back and that didn’t register. And when we got the plaque and the letter thanking us for signing the agreement and to put it up on the wall we sent that back as well. And it started from there.

The significance of Northgreen’s actions needs to be contextualised in its ‘feeder’ role to the University. Typically around 10 per cent of annual student intakes at the partner University are recruited from the College. This figure represents over 90 per cent of the total number of students recruited from the entire Associate College Network. As the Principal recalled:

So I was saying it isn’t good enough for the college to go along to a meeting along with 15 other providers and for our voice to be lost in amongst that kind of forum, so we’re not going to the forum, we want a separate discussion and a separate focus, and that we want to talk about supply chains and how we supply to [X University] and how [X University] comes back in the supply chain to help us improve the quality of the flow to them.

Issuing what the Principal called ‘quite an aggressive “please listen to me”’ threatened to undermine both the associate network and existing funding relationships, but the action was justified on the grounds that they simply did not represent good value for money. The outcome was a new ‘Memorandum of Understanding’ designed to pinpoint the advantages of working in a closer strategic alliance and clarify the objectives through a joint development plan.

However, the shift to a strategic alliance based on the new Memorandum of Understanding reinforced the tensions between corporate control and distributed provision in relation to HE across the College. The fact, noted above, that HE programmes have traditionally been offered in all three Colleges provided one of the rationales for locating strategic leadership and control of its partnership alliance within a separate Directorate at the centre. The Principal explained that the decision was to locate these elements:

...under the heading of Strategy and Partnership, so we did see it as partnership because of the HE partnerships and we did see it as strategic and

we didn't see it as a single college location. And we did bring those policy documents to the management team and we did kind of draw together the three delivery points with the strategy development...together. So we did look at it strategically.

However, the resulting decoupling from curriculum development and responsibility caused tensions. The Vice-Principal A, noting that federal arrangements were unusual across English colleges in FE, admitted:

...we've still got a long way to go in terms of devolving things to local colleges. It's quite an interesting tussle between corporate and.... [devolution to] the three colleges.

Another respondent with corporate rather than College responsibility for HE developments noted:

I have some interesting relationships with the three federal Colleges. Half the time they're saying "can we have some money to do something" and the other half of the time they're saying "why are you trying to make us do things we don't want to". Well somebody has to do the development work. And I think there is a conservatism, you know, I came out of direct line management and there is a conservatism there that if you're doing what you're doing well and the inspectors are telling you you're doing it well why change it. And it needs somebody outside as a goad and a lead and a prod to actually get people to develop more.

(Head of HE, Northgreen College)

The interview data suggest fairly widespread awareness at senior level of the difficulties arising from the federal structure. College perspectives on the problem recognised the advantages of locating administrative support centrally because it ensured cross-College and cross-site consistency in the underpinning systems designed to see students through their studies. However, as one of the federal College Vice-Principals observed:

The danger, and I think we've fallen for it to an extent, is by that investment of the management and the subsequent management of development funding and all that kind of stuff that comes with it, invested in a central... [approach]... has meant that the curriculum areas within local colleges may or may not have.....they've probably been possibly sometimes more reactive than proactive in their approach.

On the other hand, decoupling through a federal model has enabled the FE parts of the College to concentrate on their strengths and play to their dominant market segments. As these are crystallised and brought into step with the emerging agendas particularly in relation to skills and employer related provision, opportunities for progression through the system are being recognised and constructed into systems. However, the HE end of these systems has proved more problematic within the federal model. The challenge has been not simply to provide a higher education type environment but to find ways of making the inevitable decoupling of strategy and development from operational responsibility for delivery work in practice. Equity and widening participation strategies are deeply implicated in these federal milieux. The final comment on the model is from the Principal:

It's a problem....if you follow the mission then it's bound to be distributed in that way in a college of that size because it will follow the vocational curriculum and it will also be accessible, you know, Asterthorpe might be a lot better for vulnerable people to go to Asterthorpe than to go into the city centre, same with Rosham, and the equipment is different in certain places and the progression is related to some staff in curriculum areas and so on.

#### *The limits to hybridity: East Heath College*

The second case study illustrates a variant of the decoupling model of boundary encounter and transition. Unlike decoupling at Northgreen into a decentralised or federal model, East Heath College has pursued an explicit demerger strategy designed to effect the formal separation of the existing institution, which would cease to exist, into two distinct institutions: one primarily (though not exclusively) for the provision of FE and the other for the provision of HE. At the time of the visit the College was on the verge of formally demerging its FE and HE businesses. The remodelling would create a new higher education provider – University Centre East Heath – and a ‘rebranded’ further education provider – New East Heath College.

The demerger strategy has followed a complex path and is part of a longer cycle of development since the 1960s during which the fortunes of the College have ebbed and flowed with broader local and regional imperatives. East Heath College is located in an area without an immediate university presence. In the absence of university, it has

grown as a mixed economy institution offering substantial amounts of directly funded HE but in an FE setting. Other major players on the HE side of this process are two 'old' (pre-1992) universities in neighbouring counties and, at national level, the HEFCE as part funder and facilitator. The uniqueness of the University Centre model is the creation of a subsidiary company wholly owned by the two Universities – a company limited by guarantee and operating, in effect, as a semi-autonomous University. University Centre East Heath can in effect be conceptualised as a university spin-out company which will act as the legal entity or vehicle through which the two collaborating institutions can extend higher education provision into an area previously served by a more traditional mixed economy model.

The de-merger path followed at East Heath stands in stark contrast to the federal decoupling at Northgreen College and the merger model adopted by Southleigh University. Indeed, from another perspective, the joint venture between the two collaborating universities at East Heath can be represented as a form of transfer across the further-higher boundary. But whereas the model followed at Citygate College transferred the entire institution from legal status as an FE College into an HE institution, the approach at East Heath splits HE from its FE roots and transfers only the former into the HE sector. The launch of University Centre East Heath therefore leaves the 'old' East Heath College to be reformed predominantly around its FE provision. The outcome will be a rebranded and relocated 'New' East Heath College endowed by a new build facility provided as part of a wider package of educational, economic and cultural regeneration on a neighbouring site to University Centre East Heath.

Why has this particular trajectory emerged at East Heath? Part of the story can be interpreted as a response to a particular local-regional dynamic. East Heath serves an area which historically has seen low levels of participation in higher education. Because it lacks a resident university there has been a steady drift of the higher education age group to other universities outside the region – in effect a 'brain-drain' of highly qualified people who leave the area to access higher education opportunities elsewhere and who do not return after qualification. The external impetus provided by the skills and regeneration agenda promoted by local and regional government has

been influential in pushing the case for establishing an institution with university status in the area.

Whilst these external elements, not least the almost accidental history of English university history, are important contextual elements in the moves towards creating a university presence, a key part of the rationale for the demerger strategy is derived from the internal dynamics of the College itself. Interviews with senior executives indicate a longer-term problematic within the College of being dual or mixed economy. In this narrative, senior executives portray hybridity as a significant challenge. To understand this narrative requires a brief overview of longer-term institutional developments.

East Heath was a post-WW2 creation following the concept of a 'Civic College' model designed to address national skill shortages, particularly in the traditional engineering and construction sectors. The present College was formed in the late 1950s out of an amalgamation of several disparate entities which, crucially were already involved in provision of limited HE courses. By the 1970s the College was offering CNAAs making it well placed for subsequent expansion of HE during the 1980s. By this time it was directly funded through the then Polytechnic and Colleges Funding Council (PCFC) working with several validating partner institutions. Crucially the College was also running its own courses though following the demise of the CNAAs in 1992 it switched tack to work with a single validating university partner. This partnership was further consolidated when it became an accredited College of the University enabling it to validate and quality assure undergraduate provision. With the two nearest universities providing research oriented HE, the College in effect began to fulfil the role of 'the polytechnic in the middle' (Principal).

However, these higher education developments should not obscure the fact that although legally a College in further education it gradually acquired an adult education feel to it, losing sight of its more traditional 16-19 provision in the process. As the Principal observed:

I don't think we were terribly worried about the HE, I mean we could see that going in a good direction, we were worried about the FE and we had a very

poor inspection just before I took over as Principal - I reckon we were in the bottom 10% of FE colleges

The poor inspection result and an accumulated deficit by the end of the 1990s confirmed the effects of academic drift:

And gradually what was happening, we began to put in full-time FE courses, expand the vocational away from the 19+ to the 16-19 and very gradually we began to change from being an entirely adult organisation to one which was teaching “adults” and younger people on full-time courses. That had accelerated the last three to four years but it was gradually happening during the expansion of higher education.... Because what was happening to the organisation was...we were actually beginning to take new cohorts of young people in with relatively little staff expertise to teach them - they'd all been used to teaching part-time professional HNC's, HND's, all the stuff which is adult.....and then at the time we were organised in a traditional mixed economy way i.e. we did not separate out higher education from FE.

(Principal East Heath College)

Reflecting on the causes of these problems one respondent suggested that by the mid- to late-1990s the College had developed its structures and ethos to the extent that ‘it was getting to look more like a small HEI’ (Assistant Principal, Learning). The scale of HE provision by this time – around 2-3,000 full-time students – was such that senior leaders were beginning to question the sustainability of running a mixed economy model. A tipping point had been reached in terms of the scale of HE provision and the income it brought with it, beyond which, it was argued, the mixed economy model had turned from advantage to barrier in terms of further growth. Nor was the model securing the levels of internal progression anticipated. On the contrary, further blurring of the further and higher boundary internally was increasingly seen as counterproductive. The problem, as one respondent explained was that the College simply didn't have:

the look and feel of a university or a higher education experience, the classic story - part of my area of responsibility includes [HE] essentially run on the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> floor of this tower block, anybody coming in from [external organisation] or major insurance companies or whatever to do an MBA stand in a lift with some 14 year olds who are doing bricklaying courses or some 16 year old girls who are doing hairdressing or whatever, and fabulous though they are, they are making noise or behaving in ways that aren't necessarily those that somebody who has paid a reasonable level of costs for an MBA. So

we're doing it in old '60s buildings which are past their sell by date. So we don't get the sorts of level of progression that we might.

(Vice-Principal A, East Heath)

To address the problem the College took the decision to abandon the traditional mixed economy approach by reorganising the structure into quite distinct HE and FE.

Branded spaces were created in different floors and areas of the College to reinforce association with either FE or HE. Teaching staff were no longer asked to 'teach post-graduate MBA one day and then a 16 year old on a first diploma' the next (Principal) and instead were given separate contracts for specialising in either FE or HE.

Between the separated FE and HE activities the College created a central tier of services – finance, marketing, quality assurance, student support etc – to deal with both FE and HE. To lead the separated structures, lines of reporting were created into a central senior management team (SMT) which coalesced around the notion that: it was better to get your institutional budget right and sort out [the] sector afterwards' (Principal).

Although the danger of running two colleges rather than one was clear, looking over the period of separate FE and HE the consensus of opinion was that it had been:

...very difficult to run HE alongside FE. It's difficult contractually, it's different in terms of the quality assurance mechanisms, it's different in terms of legitimate expectations on academic staff, legitimate expectations for business support structures etc. etc.

(Vice-Principal A, East Heath College)

The Principal, a self-confessed sceptic of mixed economy institutions, felt the institution had out-grown its relationship with the HEFCE yet paradoxically was seen by the FE community as suspect precisely because it offered too much HE. The problem was the hybridity associated with trying to maintain the mixed economy model. 'I'm not a great fan of mixed economy institutions, I think they're a nightmare', the Principal observed, explaining that:

I couldn't see an advantage, couldn't see an advantage at all really, no. I think if you're an FE running say a relatively small chunk of dedicated [FE or HE] or whatever, I think that's a good advantage because I think you can use your

growth and your specialities and your FE to grow local HE.... When you get “too big” you’ve got a real disadvantage

Diagnosing the causes of drift from FE towards HE was not difficult from a leadership point of view. More challenging was what to do about it. Once it became clear that internal reorganisation could only take the institution so far in meeting the demands of multiple stakeholders there were several strategic possibilities. The eventual decision to demerge was not universally welcomed. The Principal of East Heath was clear that despite the problems of dealing with FE-HE hybridity the College was ‘still successful and we shouldn’t be splitting really’. The respondent continued:

...our preference was always to simply pass over our HE to [the validating University] and for [the University] to establish University East Heath...which would have been a simple, perfect model for everybody.

According to this line of argument the College had been propelled down the road of demerger by external powerful drivers. Among these was the pressure among local political and economic interests pulling in favour of creating a distinct university presence. Frustrated by a change of government rules in an earlier attempt to rebrand East Heath as a University College, this pressure became difficult to resist. The resulting loss of impetus was later reinforced by a sense that the College’s partner University had also allowed itself to be deflected by other matters. When the matter came back to the table the terms of the debate had moved on influenced, according to the Principal, by the preference of both government and the HE funding body:

...for innovative models rather than the ones that will work... And so we were caught by that.... I think if we’d gone two years earlier we would have had a simpler model, we’d have had one university here.

(Principal, East Heath College)

From the Principal’s perspective, then, the demerger strategy was a less than optimum solution. Following a review of strategic options, facilitated by external consultants, it became clear that:

the only way that we could really, really deliver higher education and allow the expansion which the county wants and to respond to what we judged... [it] ...needs in 20 years time - not now - is to separate and in some way to pass over our higher education to a university presence, to a university I suppose in simple language. I do remember it ever so well because that was the only time I ever took a discussion paper straight to corporation without the SMT binding to it and made SMT deal with it at corporation, because I knew.... I knew I wouldn't get one. So what I decided to do was get the debate.... I knew some corporation members were very keen on a university and I knew I had to get a more... I suppose visionary debate which is away from...[SMT]... because we were all concerned about our jobs, what we do and what we've done, we're all proud of it.... I've never done that before and that was quite a tense kind of period for us.

(Principal, East Heath College)

Candidly 'not a fan of the model', the idea of creating a University company as joint venture between two competitor universities threatened, in the Principal's view, a reduction in competition for regional HE provision. Other respondents took a more benign view of this aspect of the model, but nevertheless recognised its inherent complexities and the scale of the challenge pulling off what one described as a 'crazy' and 'enormous' development. The price of complexity was the opportunity to create:

a genuine university presence, it won't formally and legally in government's terms be a university, it's not a new university, it's a new university presence and that means providing under-graduate and post-graduate provision up to and including doctorate level. It means providing research and knowledge exchange, the wave activity. It means providing residential accommodation for students in the way that one would expect in a university located in a town of this size.... It means engaging with employers in new ways, ways that transcend the engagement with an FE college etc. Now obviously all of that doesn't happen on Day One, that takes time, universities are a slow boil and we will develop this over the next decade or so. But we will do that against really ambitious growth targets.

(Vice-Principal A, East Heath college)

The limits to hybridity, what the same respondent referred to as the blurring of HE and FE, had by common consent been reached at East Heath. The demerger and the creation of the new joint venture is a considerable 'leap in the dark'. Among the intriguing speculations concerns its impact on the existing sub-regional network of Colleges in FE that also offer HE, the attainability of the ambitious growth targets and the flexibility of the University Company model in responding to new provision

opportunities and, not least, its impact on widening participation and progression. In a sense the promise of hybridity offered by the mixed economy model has itself been replaced by a new form of hybrid HE model. In this model the property coveted most is no longer duality or hybridity in terms of the further-higher boundary than the allure of ‘a genuine university presence’. Demerger at East Heath, then, had challenged and ultimately overturned one of the propositions on which the hybridity associated with the mixed economy model had been created. In the words, finally, of Vice-Principal A:

The assumption always is that you get substantial progression from FE to HE, you know, that sort of... and we don't. It's actually one of the paradoxes where you might superficially think we get big progression from FE to HE in a college like this, we don't. And part of the reason we don't is around student choice, people wanting to do something different, they want to progress to higher education, don't want to be essentially taught by the same staff at the same place, partly it's a little bit about the way our structures have created division between FE and HE, and a good FE lecturer might well encourage a student who has applied for HE to look elsewhere....

*Greenton College: a 'mini university' within a college?*

The theme of vocationally based education within a further to higher progression model recurs in our third exemplar of the decoupling model. As noted above, the trajectory of Greenton College across the further-higher boundary does not sit easily within any single model of transition. It is something of a hybrid case in this respect. It has a history of mergers that have been important in reshaping the scope and scale of its cross boundary provision, yet the rationale for its dispositions and problems in relation to duality appear to be more strongly influenced by the personalities involved in building its HE provision.

The College has a track record of providing both FE and HE, signified by incorporation in 1992 with the title of College of Further and Higher Education. Since then it has merged with a land based specialist institution and, recently, a sixth form college to form a mixed economy institution. Post incorporation the development of HE appears to have been driven by a few high profile and well-networked leaders with strong personal commitment to HE in FE. The College forged a strong consortium relationship with other sub-regional FE players but internally constructed an HE structure partially decoupled from the rest of the organisation.

Hence, 'higherness' of some provision was expressed in a separate HE registry arrangement, separate reporting lines and a physical separation in terms of the location and spread of HE students and teaching. Unlike the model at East Heath, however, this separation did not extend to teaching staff who remained based in the faculties and whose services were in effect 'requisitioned' by the HE directorate.

In the interviews respondents painted a picture of a mixed economy institution not so much unsure of its FE sector attachment and identity, but unclear how to re-articulate with this decoupled HE activity. Like several others in our sample, the College claims a distinctive contribution to the pattern of sub-regional and local HE provision through a strong focus on industry skills and experience and employability for students choosing its HE courses. A particular strength is claimed for its HEI validating partnerships which, it was asserted, provide a form of excellence kitemarking for a range of degrees and foundation degrees, as well as its Edexcel awarded HNCs and HNDs. Far from wanting to keep this activity at arms length, the goal was to:

...stay a mixed economy college and we want to be seen as a provider of quality HE, not just a deliverer of plumbing qualifications and that sort of thing. It's very important to us, especially the size we are - we've got three campuses - that we're seen as offering a range of opportunities from the age of 14 all the way through to higher education, to the full range of lifelong learning opportunities suitable for people whatever stage they're at in their development and career including post graduate. So it is strategically very important to us and it deserves to have the same amount of attention lavished on it now as have had our FE programmes.

(Vice-Principal, Greenton College)

Rather than forging a dual-sector or hybrid identity, the College was moving to develop separate sets of identities or brand values around certain key market segments. For example, in a bid to grow the area of full-cost graduate professional updating in the area of business the plan was to launch:

...the [name of college] Business School to kind of give that area of provision more of an identity in its own right. So it wouldn't be branded under the HE or the FE or the [name of college] College banner, it's [name of college] Business School.

(Vice-Principal, Greenton)

In this and other curriculum areas the goal was to link the skills and equity agendas in quite distinctive ways. As the Vice-Principal explained:

[The College has] got the credibility and the experience in vocational areas, and certainly in terms of employer engagement, that universities struggle with largely. And in terms of widening participation agenda, to attract students that wouldn't ordinarily think that they were university material and wouldn't aspire to a university, then yeah in that respect. But on the other hand, you know, if students climb up the qualification ladder maybe they'll still aspire to attend a university rather than a college.

Despite these opportunities, however, it was clear that the College was struggling to resolve some continuing internal tensions across the further and higher boundary. On the FE side there were the needs of the LSC, the demands of the OFSTED quality regime and what was perceived as pressure to deliver more for less in the FE realm. In HE, the potential to develop sustainable provision encountered the attendant demands of working strategically with the HEFCE and the requirements of satisfying quality assurance in relation to the student experience. According to one respondent, the FE domain was heavily in the ascendant to the extent that HE had been sucked into a strategic vacuum. From a purely HE perspective it was argued that the institution had failed to develop a strategic plan or strategic objectives and, allegedly, was stumbling along, unable to decide either direction or brand.

Finding a suitable road map that would lead to the embedding or re-coupling of HE into the main fabric of a mixed economy institution was certainly proving challenging. The main stumbling block was the inheritance derived from HE being perceived as a sort of mini-university in its own right, integrated in the sense of sharing the College brand yet at the same time organisationally separated in terms of strategy and structures. Although key personalities behind earlier HE development had departed, the legacy of a slightly dysfunctional relationship with the rest of the College meant there was only minimum buy-in to HE in certain parts of the College leadership. Our sense as researchers was that higher education processes had become largely self-contained, in part at least as a defensive bulwark against the accusation that they had occasionally deflected staff from core FE purposes. There was a perception that leaders with strategic responsibilities in other areas of College activity

were unaware of what went on inside the mini-university and felt little or no ownership of the activity. It could be argued that a ‘them and us’ situation had emerged in relationships between HE and FE and was proving difficult to break down.

The case study methodology cannot of course provide the level of evidence required to ascertain the salience of such perceptions across the wider College. It is presented therefore as our own interpretation of the wider problem in this particular context of accommodating a decoupled HE ‘organisation’ within a strongly FE oriented institution. One respondent reflected that the task of creating a higher education ethos in a mixed economy context was related to the fact that the students were:

...supported by FE buildings, FE facilities, FE trained tutors who have vocational expertise and so on but the very fact that we are delivering a higher education course we are looking towards best practice and....I was just going to wave something at you but I think it is in the other room, which is QAA code of best practice, which is all about establishing the HE ethos. And I mean it’s so very clear, it doesn’t have to be a physical centre, but in view of the fact that we have capital money, it makes sense to actually create one which again has more of an impact, and I think without exception our course Board of Studies and our external examiners have all said “this is fantastic”. We asked students what they wanted, if they wanted a little social area, if they wanted a computer access area and the classrooms upgraded, so I think it’s worked really well.

(Head of HE, Greenton College)

The strategy of creating a ‘mini-university’, then, had been a response to those pressures to make the HE experience distinct and different from FE. To be sure we have encountered this problem in several of the previous case studies. Pressure to create separate facilities resisted, for example at Glaister or Northgreen Colleges, yet encouraged at Citygate or East Heath. Greenton has followed the path of separation, designating some floors in teaching blocks across the different campuses as HE only, restricting access to HE students in an attempt to provide separate social areas, computers and upgraded classrooms.

Yet Greenton illustrates the paradox of the integration/separation problem. On the one hand HE is managed within a separate structure, characterised by having separate space, separate administration but no staff. The latter remain ‘owned’ and line managed within the Faculties effectively bought in to teach on HE courses. In other

respects they, like the faculties, remain locked in an FE and OFSTED dominated system. Yet the idea of a 'virtual faculty of HE', was described as generally popular with staff. Although some colleagues were pushing for a separate, rather than merely virtual, faculty, it was suggested that the majority wanted to be able to continue teaching both FE and HE in their distributed specialisms across all the Faculties. However, the model of a 'virtual' HE faculty left open key questions about how best to provide for cross-institutional quality control whilst generating among the different disciplines a collective approach. For some time the College had operated without a central Academic Board, leaving an operational line of quality management into a quality unit, mainly for FE separated from line management within the Faculties. According to the Head of HE this was a challenging situation:

...because you have accountability for quality yet you have no control over the staff or the timetables and so on and again that is an issue that I think when we looked at the beginning of this academic year to the staff to say "well would you like to have a faculty?" - where I would have more control - that they didn't want....I think they didn't want to lose what they had - which I can understand but I think....so I'm having to work in other ways, that we are working with HR, with CPD, to say when we appoint staff we need to consider their ability to teach at higher level because if you start in FE inevitably at some point you're going to perhaps develop up to teaching higher level. And we're putting in a CPD requirement so again working.... hopefully - just early stages - working with the HE Academy for the professional framework we want to engage with that, and of course again, there are again certain barriers where FE colleges can't automatically or easily get accreditation....

As a response to these problems the College had determined to bring back an Academic Standards Committee and develop its own cross-institutional quality systems through the appointment of quality improvement panels overseen by a renewed academic standards committee. But it was not just in quality control that the College had experienced structural problems. Previous cases were cited where curriculum areas were being driven from the top without buy-in or even communication with the appropriate Faculties, leaving both the latter and key Vice-Principals unaware that new HE programmes were being developed. The outcome at Greenton has been a successful period of HE expansion but a burgeoning problem of how to re-couple the mini-university with the rest of the organisation. A virtual HE faculty was the current compromise. Meanwhile, our sense was that a recent merger

would further ratchet up the pressure to find a way forward. Although there was a drive to further expand HE the configuration of strategies and structures ensured that HE was to a considerable extent continuing to fend for itself.

*Summary*

The final section has investigated three contrasting exemplars of institutions that have in different ways disaggregated or decoupled their structures in response to the competing demands of further and higher education. The argument is that through different forms of organisational decoupling these institutions have sought to accommodate the pressures of dealing with sometimes conflicting institutional demands of hybridity where the organisation is seeking to operate in dual sectors.

We have presented decoupling as a strategy for segregating the everyday life of the organisation from those externally generated demands. Hence, in the case of East Heath, from being a unitary organisation coping with the problem of how to address the needs of providing new programmes, policies and structures in order to extend from FE into HE, the institution had consciously chosen a strategy of disaggregating into two separate entities: one organisation being constituted to deal with FE, the other to focus on HE. It is a case of corporate disaggregation from one into two legally autonomous units.

Another, less radical, approach has been followed at Northgreen and Greenton Colleges, both attempting to deal with duality without formal vertical disaggregation. At the former, this was exemplified in a strategy of dissipating the pressures associated with the extension from FE into HE by decoupling the organisational structure through decentralisation. In this case there is evidence of an institution dealing with conflicting pressures and seeking to gain legitimacy with external constituents by decoupling the demands of external stakeholders in the HE domain from the internal and everyday needs of providing further education in a College of FE setting.

At Greenton the pressure has been inherited from earlier trajectories that had built a de-coupled HE mini-university within a strongly FE oriented institution. Finding a strategy that would reintegrate or re-couple HE in a management and administrative

sense was proving difficult precisely because the mixed economy model had produced contradictory pressures. The institution was determinedly mixed economy yet its HE remains far from strategically embedded. The previous success of HE in this setting had owed more to the strength of key personalities to make things happen. In their wake a strategic vacuum had developed requiring some form of organisational redesign yet an absence of the ownership or responsibility to make it happen on a cross-institutional basis.

However, as a final comment, it is important to note that the notions of ‘disaggregation’ and ‘decoupling’, rather like ‘merger’ or ‘transfer’ in previous models, appear to privilege particular institutional moments within longer-term processes of institutional change. We accept that the historical origins of these trajectories may not be captured in the case study accounts presented, a problem long recognised in sociological accounts of formal organisations (Selznick 1953: 253). However, the primary goal of the accounts has been to analyse the significance and meaning of the trajectories and to comprehend how organisational leaders rationalise them in terms of their significance for further-higher duality.

### **Findings and conclusions**

This working paper has focused on the impact of the division of English tertiary education into separate further and higher education sectors on organisational development. It has explored the relationships between the main partners in the two-sector system, and the considerations shaping their responses to widening participation policies. The approach has been to take an institutional and problem-oriented approach to the phenomenon of organisational orientation and configuration in relation to dual or mixed economy provision. To help with our empirical investigation of this terrain a typology of boundary encounters was developed comprising four different models of transition:

- Transaction – including variants of strategic and less strategic transactions designed to retain or secure institutional identities
- Transfer - from FE to HE
- Merger – including ‘vertical’ mergers between an HEI and FECs, and ‘horizontal’ between FECs and FEC

- De-coupling – including formal separation into two FE and HE entities and a federal model of distributed FE and HE

Drawing on institutional and boundary theories the empirical data from institutional case studies was explored through the lens of this typology. It is important to remember, however, that the purpose of the four models is primarily analytic. They are not presented in a way that would claim empirical distinctiveness. On the contrary, in the empirical contexts of the case study institutions there are various degrees of overlap across all the models. For example, the importance of transactions and alliances with other institutions is a characteristic that will also be found in models of transfer and merger. Similarly, it is possible to point to histories of mergers and amalgamations in the histories of many institutions.

The models therefore offer a device to help in locating and understanding the predominant trajectories of institutions across and around the further-higher boundary. They do not assume any consistent rationales or organisational configurations associated with particular trajectories. This, as the word trajectories implies, is a moving picture. Different contextual and environmental conditions can produce different institutional trajectories around the further-higher boundary and outcomes that are difficult to predict. The aim was to understand the influence of being a dual or mixed economy institution on organisational and management models, how arrangements are integrated as well as their spatial configurations. The findings from the case studies are arranged around the main thematic questions that guided the interviews in each case study site.

### *1. What are the rationales for making organisational transitions across the dual-sector boundary*

Organizational leaders play key roles in determining boundaries and their significance. It is a role closely related to their tasks as leaders in shaping institutional character and purpose, defending its institutional integrity, winning and maintaining resources and consent and ordering internal conflict (Selznick 1957: 62-63). The research encountered a variety of rationales among leaders to explain the various transitions and configurations around the further-higher boundary and the

investigation revealed these were only partially or indirectly influenced by widening participation strategies. A variety of rationales serve to explain the various transitions and configurations around the further-higher boundary. Rationales not only vary between institutions but within them and they change over time.

Missions are being stretched in new directions not just within sectors but across them. The continuum runs from provision of basic skills at one end, to the highest levels of specialist research and research training at the other. In some colleges, mission is conceptualized explicitly in terms of addressing community disadvantage around access to income, employment and education. In determining institutional positioning, whether as primarily further or higher, leaders are assessing the scope to secure resources to achieve missions.

The evidence from the case studies indicates that sector identities continue to matter. We found examples of institutions in varying degrees of transition around and across the FHE sector boundary. However, in some systems (e.g. Australia and Canada) there is a more developed or distinct identity of dual-sector, our case studies indicate this identity to be much less evident than the concept of ‘mixed economy’. Distinctiveness, even in mixed economy institutions, continues to be defined by institutional leaders primarily in terms of attachment to a sector – further or higher education. In our case study institutions, ‘duality’ was rarely deployed as a meaningful aspect of organizational identity.

In essence FE Colleges operate in predominantly local markets and local reputation is important. The HE ‘system’, on the other hand, is organised within a national context with a clearer sense of institutional status and hierarchy. We found that the primary attachment of FE Colleges continues to be primarily to the FE sector and their relationships with the HE sector differ in kind and intensity. They also vary over time. Navigating across the boundary between the sectors, although perfectly feasible, is also potentially hazardous for any institution that is unclear about its mission.

*2. What are the strategic considerations behind becoming (and maintaining or changing) dual-sector status?*

The research explored the strategic considerations behind becoming (and maintaining or changing) sector status. The main proposition emerging from the case study evidence is that FE and HE remain powerful but distinct 'brands'. In an age of increasing brand awareness in education generally this is an important point. We also detected an emerging recognition that the importance of brand values and the delivery of brand value lies not just with a sectoral identity, but with the ability to respond with agility to competitive opportunities. But the policy agenda and system is changing, with widening participation strategies wrapped up in this shifting sense of brand and institutional position.

We also found evidence of mimetic and coercive pressures on dual or mixed economy FE colleges to become more like their validating or franchising HE institutions. The demands of validating arrangements around quality and the student experience, not surprisingly, are significant drivers. But so too are the directives from the HEFCE to think more strategically about the place, purpose and implications of engaging across the boundary into HE. Such pressures are important because they relate to a continued sense of brand associated being in FE but providing HE. Position taking is influenced by the differences between these brands.

How institutional leaders imagined their organisations was an important aspect of position taking. Indeed, one of the problematic aspects of engaging across the FE-HE boundary is the potential for a gap to open between organisational image and its core identity. As parts of the institution make the transition across the boundary there are pressures for the organisation to reveal several different faces externally to its stakeholders as well as internally to its constituents. There is a potential for drift, not just from core identity connected closely to what kind of organisation it is, but from a focus on core income streams and activities. The models of transaction, transfer, merger and decoupling suggest some of the different approaches adopted by institutional leaders to deal with transitional pressures.

*3. What challenges are posed by being involved in both FE and HE in terms of integration, governance and management?*

The principal challenge posed by involvement in both FE and HE stems from the weakness of dual-sector identity in the English system. 'Dual-sector' ignores the subtle range of products and markets that are being served within such institutions. Although the brands FE and HE remain distinct the range of provision offered by institutions is segmented in more complex ways than a simple dualism. This finding applies even where the institution is formally recognised as being specialist in its provision.

We found institutions much more comfortable with a concept of multi-sector rather than dual-sector. Hence, being seen as a quality provider of vocational education across a range of levels, serving the needs of employers directly, is becoming increasingly important. However, such provision is being presented in different and quite distinct slices. These slices present their own transitional issues.

One of the consequences is that working across FE and HE requires institutions to be in an almost permanent state of transition because of the pressures to assume the dominant characteristics of one sector or the other. Despite the assertion that the labels 'further' or 'higher' remain important signals of institutional brand and mission, institutions are in a state of flux. The typology of transition indicated different forms of movement around and across the FHE sector boundary.

In determining institutional transitions leaders are assessing relationships to the sector boundary in relation to identities, images and resources. For colleges in FE, higher education provision is generally seen as a lucrative option and worth expanding to bring not just additional funding but scope to improve competitiveness and prestige. However, the means of accessing the sector and its funding possibilities vary. All institutions engaging in both FE and HE, arguably, have to deal with transactional challenges of duality. Even the few that have chosen to transfer from one sector to another, as our case study example of this model reveals, must continue with internal transactional arrangements to allow for the differences between the two sectors. Duality does not disappear with transfer. It is the home or administrative base that changes, not the mission.

Most institutions work across the boundary in a transactional sense through various forms of partnership between FE colleges and HE institutions. It would in theory be possible for an institution following the transfer path of FE to HE institution to acquire degree awarding powers and thereby dispense with the need for any form of external partnership across the boundary. The transfer model in this study had not adopted this path, however, and we can offer no empirically based comment on possible outcomes where this has happened.

Decoupling of a dual or mixed economy institution into two separate legal entities to provide segregated FE and HE does dispense with the need for formal partnership arrangements across the boundary. The same is true of mergers where the HEI is leading the merger, in effect through 'take-over' of an FEC. However, the investigation of the decoupling model in one case site took place too early in the process to capture outcomes. In the case of our study of an HEI-led merger model the evidence suggests that being dual-sector, even without the need for external partners, continues the need for internal transactional arrangements and that these may be challenging in terms of integration, governance and management.

Depending on the transitional model FE-HE institutional relationships are generally durable and enduring, but not always predictable. The case studies reveal examples chosen on the basis of proximity, others on the basis of market positioning, reputation or responsiveness. For some, direct funding and 'ownership' of student numbers determines a validation arrangement. For others, indirect funding and franchising their HE provision remains an attractive option, especially but not exclusively where student numbers are relatively small. Such arrangements share the risks of fluctuating recruitment and enables relatively small or niche provision in return for an agreed proportion of the funding. The scope for student progression between partners is not necessarily a paramount consideration in bringing partners together however.

Several institutional leaders emphasised that becoming 'dual-sector' in identity would be a mistake because of the need to deal with different markets and their associated income streams. The fact that income streams are more diverse than implied by dual sector exemplifies the problem with the term.

*4. What are the success factors that enhance activity in relation to widening participation; what are the obstacles and challenges?*

The main finding is that equity and skills agendas are not easily aligned at institutional level. To be successful in bridging these agendas requires strong and strategic coordination. Evidence from the case studies cannot be used to make wider inferences about the purchase or contribution of mixed economy or dual-sector institutions to widening participation (or skills) strategies. Yet it does illustrate perceptions of duality, transitions and boundaries across a range of institutions with somewhat different traditions and orientations. The Colleges vary in size and the proportions of FE to HE, they have different funding arrangements and partnerships and display different levels of commitment to the place and significance of dual-sector provision. The same is true in relation to their FE ethos and brand.

Despite these differences there are some interesting similarities in orientations to, and crossings of the sector boundary between FE and HE. Institutions are searching for organizational survival and competitive edge in a crowded market is dictated primary by identity (who we are) and competence (resources) concepts of boundaries. Hence their provision stretches across the FHE divide in order to construct meaningful relationships with employers and skills needs in a variety of market contexts.

The research found that initial forays into higher level provision were often driven piecemeal by a widely shared social or access mission. More recent widening participation 'strategies' are outcomes rather than drivers of these boundary orientations. However, the shift from opportunism to strategy is important and indicates a key area of differentiation from parts of the HE sector is opening up. Rethinking what widening participation might mean in multi-stakeholder and multi-mission environments is creating pressures to provide firmer coupling between organizational structures, identity and brand.

*Conclusions*

From an organisational perspective the interface between further and higher education can be represented as a terrain of differentiation and diversity. This terrain is defined

by the increasingly permeable boundary between FE and HE and is occupied fluidly by those organisations that are making various transitions across the boundary. Indeed, fluidity is a primary characteristic of a diversified model: the dynamics of the system should enable changes in the positioning, status or rank of institutions.

However, as we have suggested, these locations for HE are not widely known nor, arguably, are they universally accepted. The rationale for engaging across the boundary is not always driven solely by widening participation but by powerful market related considerations. It is at this 'bleeding edge' between two cultures, arguably, that the diversified model of tertiary education is at its most dynamic. Operating across the boundary creates new freedoms as well as new challenges, because the effectiveness of the organisation is closely coupled to connecting, sometimes competing, arguments about 'who we are'.

Among the primary challenges facing such dual sector organisations is the high degree of differentiation between the administrative frameworks and cultural rules attached to each sector or field. They are targeted on different tasks and on different outcomes. There is also a high degree of mission stretch and even role confusion – skills, widening participation, outreach, social welfare, scholarship and research, business incubation, knowledge transfer and so on.

The two sectors remain well insulated in some areas – research most obviously - though in others they are highly permeable. This means that an organisation pursuing new markets that stretch across the boundary must make important decisions about how to configure itself in order to accommodate the deeper logics, cultures and identities associated with the core purpose of the 'home' field alongside those of the 'acquired' field. Internal student progression is but one consideration in this organisational process.

Being dual sector demands sophisticated leadership. Indeed, we argue that an expansion of work-focused higher education is likely to place new demands on the access and transfer functions of dual sector institutions. Externally the organisation must be able to respond not just to the technical demands of the market place but it must master the fluidity that characterizes them. Internally academic cultures also

vary considerably, not just in terms of the differentiations between subject areas, but around the propensity for internal stratification and the competing forces for integration and separation. Leading and managing in such arenas must also encompass the need to work in more open, permeable and project oriented ways. The dual sector exemplifies the erosion of routines and cultures associated with the bureaucratic organisation and their replacement by a new dynamic that is characterized as one off, fluid, and above all, accountable.

Finally, we return to the duality hypotheses outlined earlier. We questioned whether dual sector or mixed economy institutions were different or distinctive to other types of institutions in their home fields. The hypothesis is that rather than remaining in essence 'FE' or 'HE', institutions that choose to operate across the funding and administrative boundaries become in some sense 'dual-sector'. This hypothesis implies that dual sector institutions do not merely operate in separate sectors but are, in effect, mediating in the creation of a new or hybridised field of further and higher education (FHE).

Whilst we have encountered some strong versions of duality in other tertiary education systems the evidence from the English case study institutions does not lend much support to the notion of a new or hybridised field of 'FHE'. However, organizations are a key ingredient in the alchemy of an effective cross-sector system. Arguably, in the absence of a single tertiary system, the 'gap' between further and higher education will continue to be filled by developing successful, adaptive self-governing cross-sector organizations. As mass higher education matures the market appears to be opening new opportunities for organizations able to respond quickly to the demand for customised provision.

However, the system of state steering has evolved at different rates and within different sector frameworks. Higher education institutions have a relatively long history of autonomy, yet they are conventionally seen as relatively slow moving and unresponsive. Organisations rooted in the learning and skills sector are less mature as autonomous institutions and less secure in their location between the evolving HE steering system, on one side, and the evolving markets for skills and other educational services, on the other. Nevertheless, it is these organisations that carry the mantle of

adaptability and responsiveness by reconfiguring themselves to move across and between the FE and HE boundary.

Embracing varying degrees of ‘duality’, arguably, needs a highly distinctive sense of mission and purpose, dedicated and talented learning and teaching staff capable of meeting the demands of dual sector operation, and high quality leadership that understands the nature of those demands and how to mobilise resources in response. To thrive within a cross-policy, mixed funding, model requires, therefore, special kinds of organisation.

We have seen that there is no single dual-sector model or rationale. We suggest, therefore, that understanding the characteristics of how this terrain of diversity operates at the interfaces between further and higher education and how this influences the behaviours of institutions that occupy the territory is a primary requirement of policy development for diversity and widening participation.

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