



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

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Programme
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WORKING PAPER 6

SUMMARY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

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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

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 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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Summary Findings and Implications from the FurtherHigher Project

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This is an expanded version of the Research Briefing published by the ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme in May 2008 (Parry et al, 2008).

Our objective

The project investigated the impact of a two-sector system of further and higher education on strategies to widen participation in undergraduate education in England. After 1992, institutions engaged predominantly with further education were allocated to a new further education sector. Establishments mainly concerned with higher education were brought together in a single higher education sector. The two sectors were administered, funded and regulated by parallel public bodies, each with different remits and methods.

Such arrangements assumed that further and higher education stood for different levels of learning and, for this reason, should be provided by separate types of tertiary institution. However, government policy in recent years has looked to expand higher education in the further education sector and make it easier for institutions to work with the funding and quality agencies of another sector.

Colleges and universities that provide both further and higher education are a key component of government efforts to expand access, participation and progression. They are sometimes styled 'dual-sector' or 'mixed-economy' organisations. We use 'further-higher' as a shorthand for all such institutions, whatever the size and balance of their further and higher education. Our study examined the influence of a two-sector division

on three aspects of further-higher education: system and policy formation; organisational development and culture; and student participation and progression.

Key findings

System and policy

At the macro level, our findings demonstrate that sector separation is a central and continuing influence on policy for widening participation in undergraduate education. In particular:

- Separate funding and quality regimes for further and higher education have evolved despite the lack of a developed rationale for a two-sector system.
- No stable, secure and consistent policy development has emerged for further-higher education. This is largely because (a) leadership and responsibility for higher education in the learning and skills sector is exercised by the sector bodies in higher education and because (b) no central authority has sought to develop policy for further education in the higher education sector.
- Sectors not only contain and control the movement of institutions between their territories, they also set its direction. The redesignation of a further education institution as a higher education institution is regarded as an elevation. A reverse movement is rarely countenanced and not provided for in legislation.
- The funding and regulatory regimes in each sector have moved further apart at the same time that government policy has sought to promote cross-sector provision and progression. The removal of the funding council for further education and the shift from a planning function to a demand-led system under the learning and skills council has increased this separation.

Organisation and culture

At the meso level and micro levels, our findings indicate wide variation in the forms and directions taken by further-higher institutions and their relationships with students.

Specifically:

- The primary attachment of an institution is to a sector, and relationships with another sector differ in kind and intensity. Further education and higher education remain distinct brands.
- Four basic models of further-higher organisation have emerged: those arising from one or more mergers; those involving a change of sector; those based on transactions and alliances with institutions in another sector; and those leading to organisational separation or decoupling.
- Decisions to combine further and higher education are only partially informed by widening participation strategies, or by the scope for student progression. At the corporate level, market-related considerations are often the most powerful drivers, with institutions searching for competitive edge and survival in a complex market.
- Decisions by students to move to another institution for their undergraduate education or to remain in the same establishment are shaped by the cultures of individual learning sites and the reputational standing of further-higher institutions in the organisational field.
- For students who make an internal transition, the pursuit of higher education is often more about deciding to continue with their studies, rather than engaging in a process of selecting and applying to different institutions.

Participation and progression

At each of our levels of analysis, there is evidence to suggest that the location of higher education in further education colleges has contributed to a democratisation of access and a steering or diversion of demand away from high-cost and high-status parts of the system:

- General further education colleges make a distinctive contribution to widening participation, both in qualifying individuals for entry to undergraduate education and by providing programmes of higher education.
- Compared to those transferring to higher education institutions, a larger proportion of students staying in further education colleges for their undergraduate education come from low participation neighbourhoods and areas of deprivation. The same is the case for the one in nine of all higher education students taught in further education colleges, compared to those studying in higher education establishments.
- Nevertheless, the interfaces between further and higher education are configured in different ways and do not necessarily secure smooth or seamless internal progression. Rates and patterns of progression vary considerably within and between institutions, with students who completed their further education in a higher education establishment more likely to remain in the same institution.
- Only a minority of higher education students in further education colleges enter with qualifications gained from the same establishment, at least in the previous year. Most are adults in employment who study part-time, but around half those completing foundation degrees will move internally or externally to a bachelor degree.

Boundary and duality

Asymmetries of power, influence and status define the relationship between further and higher education. Even so, this division is a zone of ambiguity, complexity and paradox:

- Dual regimes are associated with dependence and subordination but, in other respects, the boundary between the two sectors is permissive and permeable.
- On its own, the concept of duality – our original core construct – is a limited tool of analysis, especially when applied to organisational fields, learning cultures and student identities.

Major implications

- Further and higher education need to be regarded as parts of a common enterprise, with mechanisms to recognise and support this.
- There is ambivalence about the combination of further and higher education in a single institution.
- Further education colleges have still to be widely accepted as normal and necessary locations for higher education.
- Further-higher organisations do not have a specific mission, and a dual-sector identity is less evident than in some other systems.
- Institutional leaders recognise that the delivery of brand values is closely linked with sector identity as well as the ability to respond with agility to competitive market opportunities.

- Equity and skills agendas are not easily aligned at the institutional level, but require strong and strategic coordination.
- An expansion of work-focused higher education will place new demands on the access and transfer functions of further-higher institutions.
- Understanding further-higher organisational behaviour is a primary requirement of policy development for diversity and widening participation.

The research

Since 1997, colleges and universities that provide both further and higher education have been an important element in government policies to extend participation, increase differentiation and encourage diversification in the English tertiary system. These types of organisation are sometimes styled dual-sector, mixed-economy or multi-level providers. They belong to one sector but some of their provision is the primary responsibility of another sector.

Our project *Universal Access and Dual Regimes of Further and Higher Education* investigated the influence of the division between further and higher education on strategies to expand participation and promote progression in English undergraduate education.

Drawing on models and theories of differentiation in the study of higher and post-secondary education, we examined the impact of sectors at three levels: on policy formation; on organisational development; and on student progression. Our core concept was duality. We wanted to understand how, if at all, duality was expressed, encountered and experienced in these domains. As the project evolved, a wider notion of ‘furtherhigher education’ was adopted to capture the diversity, complexity and fluidity of the interfaces between further and higher education.

As a shorthand, we use the term further-higher to denote organisations that combine further and higher education within one institution. At present, around 270 colleges in the learning and skills sector teach courses of higher education, mainly in small amounts. In the higher education sector, 40 establishments provide programmes of further education. Relatively little is known about further and higher education in dual-sector settings and, more generally, their contribution to access, participation and transfer.

The project set out to explore seven main research questions:

- What is the nature and significance of the division between further and higher education, and its rationale?
- What are the relationships between the main partners in the two-sector system?
- What are the features of an effective cross-sector system of further and higher education?
- What types of students use what types of further education as a basis for enrolment and study, and in what forms of higher education?
- How significant, different or distinctive is the further education contribution to higher education?
- How is the boundary between further and higher education experienced, mediated and managed by students and staff?
- In what ways can current policy and practice be improved?

The study employed a three-level design. At the macro level, policy interviews were conducted with government and sector body officials, alongside a reading and analysis of documentary and statistical sources. At the meso level, visits to a sample of further-

higher establishments were combined with interviews with senior managers. At the micro level, fieldwork was conducted with students and staff at four case study partner institutions.

Our case studies illustrated four models of further-higher organisation involving transitions around the sector boundary: one arising from merger; a second involving a change of sector; another involving transactions and strategic alliances with university partners; and a fourth resulting in organisational separation or decoupling. Samples of students were interviewed at two points of transition at each case study institution. This included those moving from further education to higher education, either by remaining in the institution or by transferring to another establishment; and those moving from short-cycle higher education to the bachelor degree, either by staying in the institution or by joining another establishment.

Figure 1: Summary of the project

Two sectors	Three levels	Four models
Further education/ learning and skills	System and policy	Merger
	Organisation	Sector change
Higher education	Progression and transition	Strategic alliance
		Separation

Policy

Following acts of parliament in 1988 and 1992, colleges in the further education sector came to be identified almost exclusively with qualifications at levels below higher education, even though most continued with some higher level programmes, including those franchised to them by higher education establishments. Our policy interviews

indicated that the new divisions and territories produced by these legislative changes owed more to specific and immediate priorities than to any overall plan or vision for the post-secondary system. Nor has a developed rationale for a system differentiated by sectors emerged in subsequent years.

Likewise, our analysis of policy documents – published and unpublished – found little evidence of further and higher education being regarded as part of a common enterprise or, except in the loosest sense, being treated as a single system of tertiary or post-school education. How the English system combined, connected or separated its post-secondary sectors was a question posed mainly by scholars, especially transatlantic observers. Rarely was it an explicit concern for government or its agencies, even when concepts of lifelong learning began to frame the language of official statements and strategies.

This remained the case despite a shift in policy after 1997 that looked to a larger role for further education colleges as providers of higher education in their own right. Viewed previously as a residual function, the college contribution to undergraduate education was now elevated to high policy. However, no consistent or coherent policy for further-higher education has since emerged. While further education in university settings has attracted little official attention, the failure to develop a durable policy for higher education in further education colleges has prompted a recent review of the arrangements underpinning this provision.

Over these years, policy has moved and mutated, but not in ways that brought clarity or legitimacy to the college contribution. There is evidence in our research to associate this lack of policy progress with the differing perspectives and competing interests that arise from sector separation. In practice, much of the lead role in evolving and implementing policy was given to the funding council for higher education. The further education funding council neither received nor asked for a larger part in this exercise. Under the learning and skills sector, this interest grew but then retreated.

Although a joint progression strategy was developed to bring together the two funding bodies to promote initiatives such as lifelong learning networks, the funding and regulatory regimes had themselves moved apart. The removal of the funding council for further education and the shift from a planning function to a demand-led system under the learning and skills council increased this separation. As a result, the central authorities for higher education continued to shape policy and practice for part of the work of institutions in another sector. These and other examples point to strong asymmetries in policy approaches and processes for further-higher education.

Individual further education colleges might complain about this relationship and its effects on their 'delivery' of higher education, yet this was frequently the extent of their challenge to issues of policy ownership and leadership. Indeed, the mixture of avoidance, ambivalence, anxiety and hostility generated by proposals for a larger role for colleges in undergraduate education was not limited to the higher education sector and its institutions. In contrast to their American counterparts, the English colleges were less able to secure the political patronage of powerful actors and less concerned to ensure that were defined as an integral part of higher education.

Organisation

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

The organisational map is complex, with around 140 further education colleges funded directly for their higher education and around 260 receiving funds indirectly for higher education, mainly through partnerships with one or more higher education establishments or, for some, through funding consortia. A significant number draw on both direct and

indirect sources. When validation and quality arrangements are included, together with membership of lifelong learning networks, the picture becomes more complicated again.

Early in our study, we characterised the range of arrangements and partnerships used by colleges to manage their higher and education provision. This process led us to recognise the need for a more refined set of analytical tools to explore boundary understandings and organisational behaviours. Although the primary attachment of an institution is to a sector, we found examples of institutions in varying degrees of transition around and across the further-higher boundary.

To understand these transitions we took an institutional and problem-centred approach to the phenomenon of organisational configuration and orientation to the sector boundary. Drawing on institutional and boundary theories, we explored with senior leaders four aspects of being dual, mixed or multi-level providers: the rationales for making organisational transitions; the strategic considerations behind becoming, maintaining or changing a further-higher status; the challenges to integration, governance and management; and the success factors that enhance activity in relation to widening participation, along with the associated risks and obstacles.

A variety of rationales served to explain these configurations and trajectories, but in most instances decisions to embrace duality were only partially informed by widening participation strategies, or by the scope for student progression. At the corporate level, market-related considerations were often the most powerful drivers. The case studies indicated that further education and higher education remain powerful brands. At the same time, provision is segmented in more complex ways than a simple dualism. Institutions seemed more comfortable with a concept of multi-sector than dual-sector.

Institutions working in the two sectors are making numerous transitions across the boundary in a transactional sense. Structures and operational arrangements vary considerably between and even within institutions. Whereas a merger was sometimes a powerful factor in creating dual-sector universities, collaboration with higher education

institutions was an important means by which many colleges could access additional funding. Some partners were chosen on the basis of proximity, others on reputation or responsiveness. Franchising was an attractive option where student numbers were small because it shared the risks of fluctuating recruitment.

The case studies demonstrated a variety of funding and partnership arrangements and displayed different levels of commitment to the place and significance of further-higher provision. We found institutions searching for competitive edge and survival in a complex market. Some struggled more than others to maintain an appropriate sense of identity and image whilst moving across the further-higher boundary in search for resources and position. Social mission and widening participation strategies are bound up in these shifting boundary orientations and identities.

Progression

Much as further education colleges have been rediscovered as locations for higher education, so the idea of seamlessness has been reclaimed from the era of advanced and non-advanced further education. Along with indirect funding partnerships, foundation degrees and lifelong learning networks has come an acknowledgement by government that present arrangements might pose ‘barriers’ to stronger articulation, smoother progression and better integration.

When further education and higher education are combined in a single institution there is a common presumption that, whatever their origins in merger, redesignation or internal development, seamlessness is or should be a major goal of the institution, that its courses of further and higher education can be routinely matched, and that its staff and students are attracted by opportunities for internal progression.

Our four case study partner institutions suggest evidence to the contrary; or rather they show that rates and patterns of progression vary considerably within and between our examples. Only one of these establishments had strong and smooth progression as a clear

strategic goal, and it was the only one to brand itself a dual-sector institution. Two of the other case study institutions were keen to exploit the potential for aligning or bridging their further and higher education. In one, specialisation created opportunities for vocational and academic forms of progression and at the other, the decision to invest in a strategic alliance with one higher education partner encouraged another look at progression.

In our fourth partner institution, where undergraduate education had expanded successfully and purposefully over many years, progression was often understood and valued in terms of students leaving its further education for other providers of higher education. Staff were sometimes genuinely puzzled by variations in progression in their own institution. We also found tutors and their students keenly aware of the reputational differences that shaped choices and transitions in English higher education. High-achieving students in particular were often supported and encouraged to look elsewhere for their undergraduate education.

For students who make an internal transition, the pursuit of higher education is often more about deciding to continue with their studies, rather than engaging in a process of selecting and applying to different institutions. Internal progression provided opportunities for students who were less likely to study elsewhere. This included students who made positive decisions to stay within the institution as well as lower-achieving students who had been unsuccessful in gaining places in other establishments and students who were undecided or ambivalent about their next stage of study.

We found that concerns about ‘place’ were not just to do with a wish to live and study locally (or to move away) but were linked to a sense of familiarity and fit with particular institutions. Confidence and perceptions of risk affected decision-making, and this applied to transitions both within and beyond the same institution.

Furthermore, our interviews with students and staff highlighted how decisions to leave or remain within the same establishment are shaped by the cultures of individual learning

sites. The perception of higher education as a ‘reasonable’ or ‘desirable’ progression route varied across the learning sites within and between institutions. This related not just to the type of qualification pursued (academic, broad vocational or occupational). It was also linked to available career pathways that differed in their demand for higher level qualifications. Where higher education was not a clear requirement, the idea of progression to higher education as ‘desirable’ depended not a little on the expectations created and sustained by staff involved in the learning site.

On a broader front, our statistical studies showed that general further education colleges – the largest category of institutions in the learning and skills sector – make a distinctive contribution to widening participation. On the one side, they qualify a large proportion of the students from low participation neighbourhoods and less affluent areas. On the other, they attract a larger proportion of higher education students from such neighbourhoods and areas than do institutions in the higher education sector. Although accounting for just one in nine of the undergraduate population, with no increase in this proportion in recent years, colleges in the learning and skills sector remain an important setting for access and participation, especially for working class and non-traditional students

While higher education in further education colleges has contributed to a democratisation of access, there is also evidence to suggest a steering or diversion of demand, away from the bachelor degree and toward short-cycle and work-focused higher education.

Nevertheless, the great majority of those using further education colleges to qualify for undergraduate entry move to institutions of higher education. Moreover, only a minority of higher education students in further education establishments enter with qualifications gained from the same establishment, at least in the previous year. Most are adults in employment who need or prefer to study part-time and, for those completing the equivalent of a two-year full-time qualification (such as a higher national diploma or foundation degree), up to a half will move internally or externally to a bachelor degree.

Major implications

The shift to mass higher education and the reform of 14-19 education raise questions about the role and survival of a two-sector tertiary system. The asymmetries of power, status and influence reflected in the arrangements for these two sectors bear directly on multi-level universities and colleges. Compared to institutions in the higher education sector, those in the learning and skills sector enjoy less scope and freedom to evolve their higher education. In particular, they are often dependent on national agencies and individual institutions in the higher education sector for their funding or validation or both.

A terrain of differentiation and diversity is opening up around the sector boundary, as defined by an increasingly permeable interface between the sectors. This interface can be represented as a 'bleeding edge' between two cultures. Operating across the boundary can provide new freedoms for organisations as well as new challenges. The effectiveness of boundary transitions at the organisational level is influenced strongly by the need to connect sometimes competing arguments about 'who we are' with core activities, income and operating structures.

However, not only do sectors continue to contain and control the movement of institutions between their territories, they also set its direction. The redesignation of a further education establishment as a higher education institution is regarded as an elevation. A reverse movement – if it ever happened – would be considered a demotion and a sign of failure. Instead of separate and overlapping zones of further and higher education, contemporary conditions favour an open system of colleges and universities. The planned extension of the compulsory phase, together with an expansion of higher education for adults in the workforce, will reshape the landscape of tertiary education. If the concept of further education is exposed as redundant, it should be abandoned.

While further-higher organisations in the higher education sector owe their origins to specialisation, merger or redesignation, further education colleges have often acquired

their higher education in less planned ways. Within the learning and skills sector, a differentiation is emerging between: a minority of colleges with sizeable amounts of mostly directly-funded higher education (the self-styled 'mixed economy group'); and a large majority which teach small amounts on behalf of partner universities. Some higher education in colleges is long-standing, and all undergraduate programmes come under the scrutiny of the same quality assurance agency as for higher education establishments. However, these locations for higher education are not widely known or universally accepted.

Unlike organisations in analogous systems such as in Australia, sector attachments in England have generally discouraged the cultivation and assertion of distinct dual-sector identities. Nor have they necessarily led to strong articulation and smooth internal progression between courses of further and higher education. There are other reasons as well why policy assumptions about 'seamlessness' are sometimes wide of the mark. Work-focused higher education, as exemplified by foundation degrees, is frequently designed and targeted at those in the workplace, and is not expected to draw students from those already enrolled in the further education college.

In other words, some boundaries between further and higher education are about difference, specificity and particularity. In policy discourse and commentary, there is a tendency to construe boundaries as barriers. In some circumstances, there may be positive and productive features of boundaries, not just negative consequences. On the other hand, more could be done to ensure a strategic approach to the coordination and integration of further and higher education, both at the system and regional levels and by individual institutions. Equity agendas and skills priorities are not easily aligned, yet widening participation strategies require that progression and transfer be given as much attention as access and admission.

We have shared these findings with policymakers, managers of colleges and universities, and tutors and other practitioners. In particular, we have advanced arguments for a steered and staged approach to build quality, ownership and sustainability in the higher

education mission of the further education sector. At the same time, we have identified features of an open system of colleges and universities.

Figure 2: Some features of an open system of colleges and universities

- A common system of colleges and universities marked by diversity and a broad division of labour
- A central authority with strategic responsibility for higher education and the education and training of adults
- A more independent role for colleges at the undergraduate levels of education based on direct funding and awarding powers
- A single qualifications and credit framework to support regional and local arrangements for access, progression and transfer
- A re-balancing of funding and student support to underpin part-time education and training

The warrant

Our findings are based on an analysis of more than 400 policy documents and statistical sources, some 50 interviews with senior officials and managers in sector bodies and institutions, and 200 interviews with students and 45 interviews with staff in our four case study organisations. Fieldwork visits and interviews took place in 10 further-higher establishments in England, together with one dual-sector institution in Australia. The project was informed by a growing academic and international literature on relationships between colleges and universities in tertiary systems.

Features of our methodology strengthening confidence in our findings include:

- choice of case study organisations with contrasting histories, geographies, configurations and strategies

- appointment of a research associate in each case-study institution to facilitate and contribute to the fieldwork
- interviews with samples of students at points of transition between programmes, levels and institutions
- a range of methods including interviews, observations, documentary analyses, statistical studies and literature reviews
- access to matched data on students moving between further and higher education supplied by the Higher Education Funding Council for England
- membership of relevant committees of the Association of Colleges, Foundation Degree Forward, the Higher Education Academy and the Mixed Economy Group
- conduct of parallel research and evaluation projects in cognate areas for sector agencies and national bodies
- reporting of approaches and findings to reference groups, partner institutions and international forums.

Further information

Copies of conference papers and presentations arising from the research can be downloaded from the project website www.sheffield.ac.uk/furtherhigher

In addition, the following publications draw on the work of the study:

Parry, G., Thompson, A. and Blackie, P. (2006) *Managing Higher Education in Colleges* (London, Continuum).

Parry, G. (2007) The English Experiment, *Journal of University Studies*, 35, pp. 95-110.

Bathmaker, A-M., Brooks, G., Parry, G. and Smith, D. (2008) Dual-Sector Further and Higher Education: Policies, Organisations and Students in Transition, *Research Papers in Education*, 23 (2), pp. 125-137.

Parry, G., Bathmaker, A-M., Brooks, G. and Smith, D. (2008) *Combining Further and Higher Education: Policy, Organisation and Progression*, Research Briefing, 40. London: Teaching and Learning Research Programme.

In addition, a series of working papers on each of the main parts of the project are available on the project website.

Project website

www.sheffield.ac.uk/furtherhigher

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