



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

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WORKING PAPER 2

POLICY STUDIES

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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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Policy Studies in the FurtherHigher Project

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Introduction

A combination of documentary analyses and policy interviews was undertaken to understand how, in the years following the creation of a two-sector system of further and higher education in England, the boundary between the two sectors was marked and managed by government and its agencies. A two-sector system was intended to concentrate courses of further education in one set of institutions (further education colleges) and programmes of higher education in another set of establishments (universities and higher education colleges). Legislation in 1988 and 1992 determined the criteria for membership of each sector, controlled the movement of institutions between sectors, and provided for separate public bodies to administer, fund and regulate further education and higher education.

Our interest in the policies and practices that underpin these arrangements was two-fold. First, there was from the beginning an overlap of provision in each sector, with some further education colleges teaching courses of higher education and some higher education establishments offering programmes of higher education. Second, from the late 1990s onwards, government policy 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. These developments were expected to take place within the basic architecture of a two-sector system, although each sector might be subject to reform and restructuring. Furthermore, one of the reasons for wishing to see further education colleges take a larger share of future growth in higher education was to widen participation in undergraduate education, especially at levels below the bachelor degree.

Accordingly, this part of the project was concerned with the role and operation of sectors at the system level and their impact on policies and strategies addressed to participation and progression in institutions that combine further and higher education. These colleges and universities are sometimes styled ‘dual-sector’, ‘multi-sector’ or ‘mixed-economy’ organisations. As a shorthand for combinations of further and higher education in same institution, the term ‘further-higher’ is adopted in this working paper, although elsewhere we have used these categories interchangeably. Here further-higher is applied to organisations irrespective of the sector in which they are located and whatever the size and balance of their further and higher education.

Policy for sectors, between sectors and within sectors

Given that the overall aim of the project was to examine the impact of sector separation on strategies to widen participation in English undergraduate education, our documentary and interview studies were directed to aspects of history, legislation and policy formation. In particular, we sought to describe and explain:

- The origin of two-sector arrangements and their contemporary history and character
- The rationale for a two-sector system and its assumptive cultures and communities
- The regulatory machinery governing the operation of sectors, including administration, funding, quality assurance and data collection
- The roles, functions and remits of each sector, including territories and boundaries
- The interests and agendas of ministers, government departments and sector organisations
- The relationships between sector bodies and their own and other institutions
- The nature, management and politics of boundary questions and issues
- The policy process and responsibility for higher education in the further education sector

- The policy process and responsibility for further education in the higher education sector
- The salience and significance of sectors in policy formation for participation, provision and progression
- The evolution of sectors and their directions of change
- The status and survival of sectors, and their implications for differentiation, diversity and future demand for higher education

Documentary analyses and policy interviews

These themes were investigated using two main methods: an analysis of more than 400 policy documents and statistical sources spanning the period 1988-2008, together with the findings from policy interviews conducted with members of sector bodies and government officials. A full description of these methods, along with the approaches taken in the other parts of the study, is given in Working Paper 7.

The desk, library and archive research undertaken on this twenty-year period drew on statistical reports and digests as well as published and unpublished papers produced by government departments, sector organisations and other interest groups. The analysis of these documents was supplemented by a review of relevant academic literatures, theoretical and comparative as well as empirical and contextual.

Eighteen face-to-face interviews with former and current officials in government and the sector bodies over the same period were conducted between February 2007 and October 2008. The number of interviews completed was nearly double that originally planned. This was in response to new policy measures announced by the government and its agencies. In November 2005, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) launched a review of higher education in further education colleges. In a second policy intervention, the government announced its intention to enable further education colleges to apply for the power to award the foundation degree. This was an unexpected and controversial decision. It was followed in 2007 by a major change to the

machinery of government involving the creation of two new departments with responsibility for education. This third episode involved options for the reform of sector systems and structures, including the proposal for a single body responsible for the funding of higher education and the training and education of adults.

To accommodate these new and shifting agendas, we delayed some of the interviews to the end of the project. The interviews – all conducted by Gareth Parry – were undertaken with two groups of policy officials. The first were responsible for drafting and implementing the 1988 and 1992 legislation which established a two-sector system in England. The second were chief executives of the Further Education Funding Council, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and the HEFCE in office since 1992. In addition, interviews were undertaken with officers of the LSC and HEFCE with responsibility for widening participation and cross-sector strategy.

Each interview lasted between ninety minutes and two hours. The balance of questions and themes varied according to the position of the interviewee and the time of their appointment. All but one interview were recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were read and analysed using a framework of themes developed from the review of documentary sources.

Main findings from the documentary and interview studies

The principal findings from this part of the project were reported in the paper enclosed in this document. Under the title *Higher and Further Education: the Significance of Sectors for Expansion, Differentiation and Participation in Undergraduate Education in England*, the paper served as a source report for the international and contextual studies commissioned from leading scholars in Australia, Canada, Scotland, United States and England. These studies are presented in Working Paper 1 and their commissioning is described in Working Paper 7. These international and country commentaries will be extended and revised for publication in a special issue of the journal *Higher Education*

Quarterly in late 2009 (Volume 63, Number 4). A revised and updated version of the source report will be included in this collection.

The analytical framework for the source paper is the place of sectors in a larger policy project – which we call ‘the English experiment’ – to change the pattern of future demand for, and supply of, higher level education and training in England. Ahead of that analysis, we present some of the key findings from our investigation of the recent history of sector arrangements and the influence of this division on policy formation.

The documentary studies, literature reviews and policy interviews demonstrated 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. As a consequence, further and higher education are not viewed as parts of a common enterprise and there is ambivalence about their combination in a single institution. Further education colleges have yet to be regarded as normal or necessary locations for higher education.
- No coherent and consistent policy development has emerged for further-higher education. This is largely because leadership and responsibility for higher education in the learning and skills sector is exercised by the sector bodies in higher education and because 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 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.

- The funding and regulatory regimes in each sector have moved further apart at the same time that government 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.
- Asymmetries of power and status define the relationship between further and higher education, with dual regimes associated with dependence and subordination. 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 the meso and micro levels of further-higher education.

Report and source paper on further-higher education in England 1988-2008

The original text of this paper is reproduced here in full. It was drafted in the first half of 2008 and prior to completion of all the policy interviews. The revised version for publication in *Higher Education Quarterly* in 2009 will draw on the full set of interview findings.

Higher and Further Education: the Significance of Sectors for Expansion, Differentiation and Participation in Undergraduate Education in England

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Introduction

The current pattern of institutional provision is the product of historical and legislative circumstance rather than of any overall rationale, based on location, distribution through the United Kingdom, size or type. (NCIHE, 1997, p.257)

At the same time that England abandoned a binary division in higher education, it legislated for a two-sector system of higher and further education. In the fifteen or so years since this reform, establishments in the higher education sector and institutions in the further education sector have been administered, funded and regulated by parallel public bodies, each with their own remits and methods. Such arrangements assume that higher education and further education stand for different levels of learning and, for this reason, should be provided by separate types of tertiary organisation. 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. Furthermore, these measures form part of a larger policy experiment to change the pattern of future demand for higher level education and training in England, with implications for the significance and survival of sector frameworks.

Drawing on the preliminary findings of an ESRC-funded study of *Universal Access and Dual Regimes of Further and Higher Education* (the FurtherHigher Project)¹, this paper is concerned with three aspects of the role and operation of sectors in English tertiary education. The first is addressed to the recent history of sector arrangements, their territories and boundaries, their rationales and relationships, their constituent institutions, and their sector bodies. The second is an examination of the English policy experiment and, within this reform process, the place of institutions that combine further and higher education. In a final section, some of the paradoxes and problems posed by these developments are highlighted and their implications for differentiation, diversity and broader participation are reviewed.

Before tackling these, reference is made to some of the contextual and conceptual issues that surround an assessment of the English attachment to sectors. Clearly, there are difficulties and dangers as well as advantages in placing sectors at the centre of discussion. Their influence and impact can easily be exaggerated and their boundaries too readily interpreted as barriers (Young, 2006). If oversimplification and reification are hazards, then so too are routinisation and a failure to probe the assumptive cultures that sustain divided systems and structures.

System, Structure and Theory

Among the variety of forms and structures taken by modern systems of mass higher education, those with binary sectors have proved popular and durable, especially in Europe (Kyvik, 2004). Where binary structures were replaced by unified arrangements, as in Australia and the United Kingdom, questions arise about the persistence of previous patterns in post-binary hierarchies and, the subject of this paper, the reappearance and reproduction of sectors in otherwise more open environments for higher education and higher level training. Depending on the criteria applied, and by whom, this has seen colleges in the further education sector in England positioned either outside the recognised range of providers of higher education or, if included, at the lower end of its rank order. With the most research-intensive universities located at the upper end of the system, there is a steep gradient between these institutions, the large number of other universities and higher education establishments in the middle of this extended hierarchy, and those further education institutions that offered courses of higher education.

Until recently, the scale and pattern of higher education taught in the further education sector, and that for further education taught in the higher education sector, have escaped proper enumeration and serious investigation. In part, this reflected the small volume, wide variety and marginal status of much of this provision. Indeed, the classification of some programmes as higher education was unclear and disputed. In part, it was due to the uneven coverage and quality of official statistics. Most sources report around 180,000 students currently studying for higher education and higher level qualifications in colleges of further education. These account for about one in nine of the undergraduate population in England. A smaller number of further education students – some 115,000 – are enrolled in institutions of higher education and these represent a tiny fraction of the population of students undertaking courses of further education².

American perspectives, English preoccupations

An understanding of the extent and character of this activity is important as well to theoretical, comparative and policy debates about the role of ‘lower-tier’ institutions in differentiated and stratified systems (Shavit et al, 2007). In contrast to research on the collegiate and transfer functions of community colleges in North America, the contribution of further education colleges has attracted only occasional attention from scholars of higher education. Indeed, it was often left to transatlantic observers to pose questions about the separation of further and higher education in the English system and its implications for growth and diversity.

What strikes an outsider – perhaps an American especially – is the enormous gulf that exists between further and higher education in Britain. Further and higher education are simply not part of a common system of post-secondary education, marked by diversity and a broad division of labour. (Trow, 1987, p.287)

Yet, faced with what I take to be a manifest need for a substantial expansion of higher education in Britain, and the deep impediments to that expansion built into the costs, structures and values of elite higher education in this country, an outside observer must look elsewhere. And there, not very far away, is an educational system that might serve such purposes well. A closer association of further and higher education in the British context is fraught with problems and difficulties. There is no way in which those problems and difficulties can be resolved until the possibility of such an association is put on the agenda for discussion. (ibid, pp.290-291)

Soon after Trow offered these judgements, England moved rapidly to mass levels of participation in higher education. It did so without asking or expecting further education colleges to absorb the bulk of this growth; and by reinforcing rather than relaxing its separation of further and higher education. At the height of this expansion, a division between university and non-university higher education was finally and formally abolished. It was replaced by a unified higher education sector and a sector of further education institutions whose primary purpose was the teaching and training of young people and adults at the other levels of tertiary education.

The English experience provided a severe test of the 'elite-mass-universal' model sketched by Trow (1974) and this schema had always sat uncomfortably with the development of European systems (Teichler, 2007). Furthermore, a theory that grew out of a Californian world of planned systems with neatly arranged and strictly policed sectors was ill-matched to the 'fuzzy' and 'messy' conditions of present-day higher education, with its emphasis on markets and the erosion of boundaries (Scott, 1995; 2005).

While the Trow typology has ceased to be an adequate description of the development of mass higher education, one of its more powerful legacies has been to generate comparative and analytical questions about the division of academic labour accomplished between and within institutions in national and regional systems; and where and how these are changing. To ask how societies combine, connect or separate their tertiary sectors and institutions is not just to acknowledge the power and play of structural arrangements. It is another way making explicit some of the underlying assumptions and shared beliefs which shape national policy and institutional behaviour.

In the case of England, where further education sector colleges have been rediscovered and promoted as settings for higher level education, it can shed light on a previously hidden and little understood part of the higher education system. This is all the more important given that the new interest in higher education offered in further education colleges is generally regarded as a novel or radical departure, with only limited appreciation among politicians that some of these colleges trace their involvement in higher education back to the 1950s and 1960s.

Colleges: confusion, complexity and diversity

Notwithstanding its long history, the category of further education has been a source of considerable confusion for domestic and international commentators alike. In England, the size and complexity of the sector, together with the succession of recent reforms applied to the post-compulsory phase, have made the task of reporting less than straightforward. Moreover, there are differences between England and the other 'home' nations, notably in Scotland where the larger proportion of higher education found in the further education sector has contributed to the emergence of 'two parallel systems' of higher education (Gallacher, 2002). Despite the rise of 'home international' comparisons, standard accounts and categorisations do not always acknowledge these territorial variations in shape and structure³. Likewise, the unqualified description of British or English higher education as a unified system has sometimes displaced and disguised the further education contribution (Clancy, 2006).

It is less surprising therefore that this segment of higher education has featured only intermittently in scholarly and international studies of inclusion, differentiation and diversion in higher education. These have been long-standing concerns of sociologists and economists, especially in the United States where rival accounts of the history and growth of community colleges have viewed them as vehicles for access, opportunity and democratisation on the one side or as settings for tracking, steering and cooling-out on the other. For its defenders, no other type of institution allowed more students to enter higher education, bringing benefits not only to students but also to employers and the selective universities. For its critics, the community college has failed to deliver the educational and economic opportunity it promised, diverting working class students from elite opportunities and channelling them into positions of lower status.

In England, versions of the inclusion-diversion argument find expression in disputes about how much and what kind of higher education should be offered by further education colleges, or should they be involved at all. They feature too in worries about quality and the comparability of the student experience. Most of all, they accompany a general sense of unease and ambivalence about offering lower status qualifications to lower income students in lower ranked institutions. Whether debates centre on the further education college or the more researched community college, few of the protagonists have fully appreciated the multifaceted nature of such institutions, not least their ambiguities and shifting identities:

the community college is too complex and contradictory an institution to be so easily captured. It presents its observers with a Janus face. On some questions its defenders and critics are both correct. On others they are both incorrect. And on all questions, they are incomplete.' (Dougherty, 2001, p.7)

For their part, policy-makers have followed Trow in presuming that a more differentiated or diversified tertiary system is needed to move from mass to near-universal levels of participation. Whether that be a diversity of mission, costs or standards, governments are less willing to accept the 'double stratification' – social as well as stratification – that might arise from these same policies (Brint and Karabel, 1989).

With the state remaining the principal funder of higher and further education, governments in England have used intervention and the market to create conditions for individual institutions to develop distinctive profiles and identities. Institutional diversity in the higher education sector is intended to produce academic establishments with different balances of teaching and research, along with specialisation in subject disciplines and particular areas or forms of research. Institutional diversity in the further education sector, where colleges do not enjoy the level of autonomy granted to universities and other higher education institutions, is targeted at the general further education colleges.

Unlike colleges that concentrate mainly on academic qualifications or teach courses in a single defined area, general further education colleges with multiple missions have come under pressure to focus their contribution. To enable them to cultivate a stronger and clear identity, these establishments have been urged to adopt one or more vocational specialisms for which they can be regarded as centres of excellence. It is among these colleges that most of the higher education in the further education sector is located and where articulation and progression agreements with institutions of higher education are extensive.

In another policy turn aimed at deeper differentiation and sharper competition in the tertiary landscape, it is proposed that selected colleges will be recognised as centres for higher education excellence and that, for the first time, some of the leading providers of higher education in the further education sector will be given the power to award their own higher education qualification. These and other measures, some of them radical and controversial, require neither the reform nor the abandonment of sectors, but invite questions – rarely explored or debated in public⁴ – about what purposes and whose interests are served by such arrangements.

History, legislation and designation

The structure of the English two-sector system and the criteria for allocating institutions to one sector or the other were laid down by acts of parliament in 1988 and 1992. Thirty years after the establishment of a ‘distinctive’ sector of higher education within the further education system (DES, 1966), the Education Reform Act of 1988 removed the polytechnics and some other large higher education providers from the control of local government and transferred them to their own polytechnics and colleges sector. The planning and funding of the new sector was the responsibility of the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council (PCFC). In a parallel measure, the University Grants Committee was replaced by the Universities Funding Council.

Within the local authority system in England, there were 29 polytechnics and 346 other further education establishments that provided higher education. Only those institutions of ‘substantial size’ (with 350 or more full-time equivalent students) and ‘engaged predominantly in higher education’ (with more than 55% of their activity in higher education) were established as free-standing establishments in the new sector (DES,

1987). These were joined by the voluntary and other grant-aided colleges and by those predominantly higher education establishments with fewer than 350 students which were given the choice of transferring into the new arrangements. As a result of this restructuring of the binary system, 84 higher education institutions were brought into the English polytechnics and colleges sector while the 43 universities in England continued in membership of a universities sector for the whole of the United Kingdom.

Binary sectors of higher education and a further education sector

Alongside the two sectors of higher education was a third sector composed of colleges whose 'main concern' was 'non-advanced further education' rather than 'advanced further education' (higher education). These were the further education colleges that remained under local authority control. Where previously further education was a 'national system, locally administered' supporting courses at both the advanced and non-advanced levels, the 1988 Act established further education as a sector intended for colleges concerned exclusively or predominantly with courses below the undergraduate levels.

However, the higher education that remained in the local authority sector was substantial and diverse. Around 300 further education colleges had some higher education provision, mainly part-time, largely vocational and at levels below the bachelor degree. Approximately 120,000 students were enrolled on higher education courses, or just over 20% of the full-time equivalent students on advanced courses in the pre-1988 further education system. Much of this work met essentially local needs, such as the part-time higher national certificate (HNC), but some colleges offered the bachelor degree and many supported the full-time higher national diploma (HND).

The decisions taken at this time were to exercise an important influence on the development of college-based higher education down to the present day. For all bachelor degree and postgraduate work, the full-time higher national diploma and diploma of higher education, and for courses of in-service teacher training leading to a recognised qualification, the PCFC was responsible for their funding and planning. In a schedule to the 1988 Act, these were described as 'prescribed courses of higher education'. For other courses, including all part-time provision below the bachelor level (such as the higher national certificate and higher level professional qualifications), there would be no central planning agency and the local authorities would be provided with funds through the rate support grant. These were the 'non-prescribed courses of higher education' omitted from the schedule.

Henceforth, the local authority interest in higher education was officially regarded as 'residual', although the PCFC was expected to consult with local authorities about the prescribed higher education it funded at 90 or so colleges in the further education sector. The full-time higher education funded by the PCFC represented about 20% of the students studying for higher level qualifications in further education colleges. There was also a small amount of non-advanced further education in the institutions that transferred

to the polytechnics and colleges sector. This provision, like that elsewhere, was the responsibility of the local authorities.

In splitting the polytechnics and other major establishments from the college providers of mainly non-advanced higher education, the 1988 legislation was the culmination of efforts by central government over several decades to concentrate full-time higher education in a limited number of centres. While proud of their own polytechnics, many local authorities argued for a 'seamless robe' of advanced and non-advanced further education that would extend access to higher education and provide alternative routes for 'second chance' and 'non-traditional' students. It was a view echoed by the independent government inspectorate. In increasing the variety and geographical spread of higher education, the further education colleges had played an important part in 'widening opportunities for students' (DES, 1989).

In creating a three-sector structure for post-school education, the 1988 Act and its preceding white paper provided no overall plan or rationale for a system differentiated along these lines. Rather, the new divisions and territories produced by this legislation owed more to specific and immediate priorities. In particular: what to do about the polytechnics; and how to address weaknesses in the existing national planning and funding arrangements for higher education, especially in the non-university sector.

The polytechnics had developed strong national roles yet they continued to be owned and controlled by individual local authorities. Not only did they recruit students nationally and meet the needs of employers nationwide, they offered all the major subjects except medicine and catered on average for a larger number of students than the universities. Freed from local constraints, it was argued, they would be better able to manage their financial and staffing resources and demonstrate the maturity and responsibility appropriate to higher education institutions.

Equally unsatisfactory for government were the planning arrangements for higher education in the polytechnics and colleges sector, with more progress demanded in rationalising scattered provision and concentrating effort on strong institutions and departments. In registering these frustrations, an earlier green paper touched on the motivations and assumptions that were to guide later action:

The total provision required is not necessarily as well developed across colleges as it could be. There is a need for a substantial geographical spread in the interests of access, especially for part-time courses, and there are often educational and economic advantages in the association in a single college of degree and sub-degree work. But there is also evidence that degree work is so much better done where there is a fair concentration of it, that this consideration should prevail over the claims of easy access.' (DES, 1985, p.37)

Taking the polytechnics out of the local authority system, and abolishing the national advisory body for local authority higher education, also had a political dimension. It was in local government, especially the metropolitan authorities, that Labour-controlled

administrations were pursuing policies at odds with the restrictions on public spending required by a Conservative central government.

In the absence of a larger vision and argument for the 1988 settlement, it fell to the newly appointed chief executive of the PCFC to explain the advantages brought to the redefined further education sector by the removal of the polytechnics. It returned the name 'further education' to the sector: 'a name that is honourable and traditional and important' and one no longer burdened with the negative language of non-advanced further education. Relieved of responsibility for higher education establishments, it made the mission for further education 'more prominent and more distinct' (Stubbs, 1988).

A higher education sector and a college sector

In the event, the new three-sector architecture lasted just five years. The Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 abolished the binary line and unitary sectors of higher education were established in each of the territories of the United Kingdom. So as to achieve 'UK-wide standards', each of the separate higher education funding councils for England, Scotland and Wales were required to collaborate in the assessment of teaching and research. At the same time, the further education colleges were removed from local authority control in England and Wales. As in higher education, the colleges in the new English and Welsh further education sectors were funded directly through a Further Education Funding Council (FEFC).

These changes were introduced during the peak years of expansion in higher education and the further education colleges were expected to emulate the gains in increased student numbers and increased efficiency demonstrated by the polytechnics and attributed to the freedom given to them in 1989. If this was the main justification for reform of the further education sector, that for the unification of higher education rested on 'breaking down the increasingly artificial and unhelpful barriers' between the universities and the polytechnics and higher education establishments (DES, 1991).

Beyond this, there was once again no overarching argument for a two-sector tertiary structure nor for relationships between their central bodies and constituent institutions. Despite participation rates for young people approaching 30% and little sign of weakening demand for undergraduate courses, it was assumed that the bulk of future growth could and should be taken by those institutions whose main business was higher education. Although higher education continued to be funded and taught in further education colleges, the white papers announcing the formation of the new sectors were conspicuously silent about the college contribution. There would be incentives for further education colleges to increase the number of people gaining 'higher level vocational qualifications' but these were viewed as 'outside higher education' (DES, Department of Employment and Welsh Office, 1991).

From 1993, the FEFC was responsible for funding full-time and part-time education for adults and young people over the age of 16 (the official school-leaving age) at 465 further

education colleges in England. It also allocated funds for further education at some 50 higher education institutions and a further 500 'external' providers, mainly local authority adult education centres. It also inherited responsibility for funding non-prescribed courses of higher education at most of the former local authority colleges.

The colleges were of three broad types. The majority (nearly 300) were general further education colleges providing academic, vocational and general education to students of all ages and at all levels up to entry to higher education. Just over 60 were specialist institutions, including those offering land based subjects and colleges of art, design and the performing arts. It was among the general and specialist colleges that provision was made, usually on a small scale, for higher education and higher level qualifications. A third category of sixth form colleges concentrated on academic courses for young people preparing for higher education and was previously under school regulations. Further education colleges were teaching-only institutions. They taught courses leading to nationally-recognised qualifications as well as uncertificated programmes. Only rarely did they award qualifications in their own name.

When launched, the new college sector catered for around three million students (largely part-time) and the new higher education sector enrolled over one million students (mainly full-time). The Higher Education Funding for England (HEFCE) acquired funding responsibility for 71 universities and 48 institutions of higher education. The universities were broadly based multi-faculty institutions providing courses at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels as well as undertaking research. Two of the universities were previously funded directly by central government and 33 were former polytechnics (including one college of higher education) which had been granted degree-awarding powers and university status following 1992 Act. The institutions of higher education consisted of general and specialist establishments. Some had their own degree-awarding powers but the majority awarded degrees validated by universities. In addition, the HEFCE inherited responsibility from the PCFC for funding prescribed courses of higher education at nearly 80 further education colleges.

With some adjustments on the way, this is how the division between further education and higher education has remained. After eight years under the FEFC, the Learning and Skills Act of 2000 combined further education colleges, sixth forms in schools, government-funded training and workplace development, and adult and community learning in a new and extended sector of post-16 education. A single organisation – the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) – took responsibility for the strategic development, planning, funding and quality assurance of post-16 learning 'excluding higher education'.

A higher education sector and a learning and skills sector

As in 1988 and 1992, the 2000 Act provided for the separation of higher education institutions from providers in another sector. This other sector covered a larger part of tertiary landscape than before and included, as its largest segment, the further education colleges. The white paper published ahead of the legislation also volunteered a short

statement on why the LSC was not granted direct funding responsibility for higher education:

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

Apart from the rarity of such statements, the white paper was unusual as well in asking the LSC to 'take full account of the contribution and potential of this important sector'. Working with HEFCE and the higher education institutions would help achieve national learning targets set for higher education and ensure that 'there is seamless transition through learning so that everyone is able to progress to the highest level possible'. These messages have since become regular recommendations and requirements in government documents addressed to post-compulsory education.

As a consequence of changes to the machinery government announced in 2007, funding for the education of 16 to 18 year-olds will transfer to the local authorities and a new Skills Funding Agency (SFA) will support a 'demand-led' system of training and skills for adults. Having survived for just a bit longer than the FEFC, the LSC will be dissolved in 2010 (DCSF and DIUS, 2008). Although colleges will be funded by local authorities for their work with young people, the SFA will maintain oversight of the whole of the further education 'service'. For the present, there is no change in sector regimes and the rules containing and controlling the movement of institutions between sectors remain the same as originally set down in 1988.

Membership of the further education and higher education sectors and approval of the transfer of institutions between them are powers exercised by central government, with advice from the funding councils. Since the higher education sector was established in its current unitary form, around ten institutions have transferred from the further education sector. All were specialist establishments and, although meeting the 55% threshold for transfer, each had small numbers of higher education students.

While transfers might be desirable in principle – since it was 'undesirable for either sectors or institutions to be completely static' – such cases were likely to be rare:

There is a fairly complete spread of HE [higher education] and FE [further education] institutions serving all parts of the country. And both sectors are set for continued student growth as part of the Government's commitment to widening participation and lifelong learning. So in general FE and HE institutions ought already to be fully occupied in discharging their existing missions. Both sectors already have the capacity for institutions to expand in whatever geographical or

subject areas are needed. Transfers of FECs [further education colleges] to the HE sector are certainly not a necessary mechanism for ensuring sufficient development of HE nationally.

What is clearly undesirable is for an FEC to make transfer to the HE sector an end in itself, driven by perceptions of prestige or financial advantage, and to seek the 55 per cent threshold by reducing its FE programmes while building up its HE programmes, thereby depriving its local community of access to FE. It is in no-one's interest to encourage that sort of 'mission drift' (HEFCE, 2001b, p.3)

Although theoretically possible, no higher education institutions have moved into the further education sector. Indeed, there is no equivalent of the 55% threshold for institutions transferring in this direction:

Our understanding is that this lack of specificity reflects an assumption that the power would rarely, if ever, be used. It has not been used to date, and we see no reason to expect that it will be. (ibid, p.7)

Policy, funding and the English experiment

The policies that founded separate sectors of further and higher education were intended to limit the overlap of courses and qualifications between the two territories. Henceforth, the higher education that continued to be taught in the further education colleges was the subject of 'low' or 'no' policy. Similarly, the further education that remained in the higher education sector hardly ever featured in policy statements or reports. Over the last ten years, the combination of further and higher education in a single institution has attracted much more attention. In the case of higher education in the further education sector, it has been elevated to 'high' policy. This did not extend in the same way to further education in the higher education sector, although mergers and transfers that promoted opportunities for participation and progression have been generally welcomed.

Under conditions of low policy, there was no reason for the central authorities to regard institutions that combined further and higher education any differently from other establishments. Accordingly, there was no official category of 'mixed economy', 'dual-sector', 'multi-sector' or 'comprehensive' institution. Some of the further education colleges with the largest numbers of higher education students had formed a lobby organisation – 'the mixed economy group' – to seek recognition by government of their distinctive profile. A handful of institutions signalled this combination in their title, as in college of further and higher education, but most did not. In the main, this was because of the small size of their higher education. This was the same for the further education offered higher education institutions, except that here the overriding concern was to preserve, protect and play to the higher status accorded to higher education.

With the shift to high policy, a small number of establishments used these categories in their by-lines, including a university that styled itself a 'dual-sector' institution following its merger with a large further education college. Government documents have

themselves occasionally used the term ‘mixed economy’ as a short-hand for these providers but no formal categories have been proposed or adopted. Nor has there been serious consideration by administrators or analysts about what balance of provision (or tipping-point) might be used to recognise organisational distinctiveness. Not even the 30 or so colleges in membership of the mixed economy group have pursued this question, even though each has more than 500 full-time equivalent students in higher education.

Low policy and the binary legacy

Like a number of smaller providers, nearly all the colleges in the mixed economy group had provided courses of advanced as well as non-advanced further education during the binary era. Funded originally through the local authorities for all their higher education, they were funded by the PCFC and then by the HEFCE for their prescribed higher education; and by the FEFC and then the LSC for their non-prescribed higher education. From the 1980s onwards, and particularly during the spectacular expansion of the late 1980s and early 1990s, some of these colleges also began teaching undergraduate programmes on behalf of many of the fastest growing polytechnics. Under franchise arrangements, colleges were sub-contracted to teach one or more undergraduate programmes, either in whole or in part. Not only did this bring higher education to some colleges for the first time, it saw a wider range of subjects and qualifications featured as well.

As a result of the largely unplanned and unregulated growth occasioned by government-orchestrated competition for funded places in higher education, the number of higher education students enrolled in the college sector increased by nearly a quarter. This rate of growth was an underestimate because information on the teaching of franchise students was not collected at this time. Whatever the adjusted figure for colleges, it was much less than for the PCFC and former PCFC-funded establishments (which expanded by nearly two-thirds) and for the UFC and UFC-funded institutions (which increased by more than one-third). Even so, this was not quite the marginal or residual activity that the 1988 and 1992 legislation expected to see reduce or disappear from the world of further education.

Pressure on public funding brought an end to full-time undergraduate expansion after 1993 and one of the early tasks undertaken by the new funding council for higher education was to review the pattern of college provision and collaborative activity in undergraduate education. This was an attempt to understand the legacy bequeathed by the PCFC and the variety of cross-sector partnerships that came out of the expansion years (HEFCE, 1995). A similar task was later undertaken by the inspectorate established to assess the quality of education in the new further education sector. Its report described higher education as ‘an integral part of the provision offered in many further education colleges’ and where its widespread availability and flexibility ‘are essential features of the drive to achieve national targets for lifelong learning’ (FEFC, 1996b).

Apart from these two internal reviews, neither the HEFCE nor the FEFC sought to evolve a policy or strategy for the higher education they funded in further education colleges. As

a result of ‘consolidation’ in higher education, only in part-time provision was a measure of growth permitted but even this was short-lived. By contrast, there were incentives offered to colleges in the further education sector to meet ambitious growth targets for both full-time and part-time students. Non-prescribed programmes of higher education were in a position to benefit from the demand-led funding paid to colleges for additional students but in its guidance to colleges the FEFC stated – without explanation or elaboration – that it did not expect to see significant growth in this provision.

When eventually induced to declare and explain its position on the role of higher education in the further education sector, it was not the eventual squeeze on its own funding that prompted such a statement. It was instead the establishment of a national committee of inquiry into higher education (the Dearing inquiry, 1996-97) that provided the stimulus for a consideration of college education at the higher levels. In its evidence to the committee, the FEFC stated that the higher education contribution of colleges should be ‘recognised and built upon’. Furthermore, given that this was ‘generally less expensive’ to provide than similar provision in higher education institutions, a further expansion of higher education could therefore prove to be ‘more cost effective’ if undertaken in the college sector (FEFC, 1996a).

High policy and the Dearing moment

In recommending that tuition fees be charged for full-time undergraduate education, the Dearing committee sought to tackle the decline in the unit of funding for higher education and to provide for expansion. Given the controversy surrounding this proposal and the model of student contribution adopted by the incoming Blair government, rather less attention was given to other recommendations in the Dearing report, including those addressed to future demand and the role of further education colleges. Various interpretations but broadly accepted by ministers, the combined proposals paved the way for a succession of policies, some of them radical, aimed at renewed growth and a break with the traditional pattern of supply and demand for English undergraduate education.

In contrast to the path taken to mass higher education, led by popular demand for the bachelor degree taught at institutions of higher education, the focus of the next phase of expansion would be on the ‘other’ levels of undergraduate education and the ‘delivery’ of short-cycle work-focused qualifications in a variety of modes, styles and settings. At the beginning of this experiment, further education colleges were singled out for a leading role, both in expansion and widening participation. Ten years on, the position of these institutions is ambiguous and uncertain. In between, the argument for college-based higher education has been contested and attenuated, especially if it suggested a more independent, discrete or protected position for further education institutions.

Just such a view was advanced by the Dearing inquiry. Notwithstanding the previous pattern of demand, the committee expected a large part of future growth taking place at the ‘sub-degree’ levels. More than that, it recommended that priority in growth in sub-

degree provision should be accorded to further education colleges, with this provision funded directly and with no growth in bachelor or postgraduate level qualifications.

We are keen to see directly-funded sub-degree higher education develop as a special mission for further education colleges. In general, over time, we see much of this level of provision being offered in these colleges, although we recognise that particular circumstances might apply in some cases. We also see no case for expanding degree or postgraduate level work in further education colleges. In our view, this extra discipline to the level of higher education qualifications offered by further and higher education institutions will offer each sector distinctive opportunities and best meet growing individual, local and national needs, although we recognise there may be different circumstances in the different countries of the UK.' (NCIHE, 1997, p.260)

The sectoral and institutional division of labour envisaged by the inquiry drew on the example of Scotland and was intended for England in particular. The higher participation rate in Scottish higher education (44%) compared to the English system (33%) was attributed, in part, to the wide scope in that country to study sub-degree higher education in further education colleges. Not only did Scotland have more of its higher education at the sub-degree levels, but nearly all of it was located in the further education sector. No bachelor degrees or postgraduate qualifications were taught in the colleges and all their higher diplomas and certificates were directly funded. In short, a single funding relationship, a single qualifications authority and a single inspectorate supported a separate segment or tier of higher education, beyond the reach of the Scottish higher education sector. Colleges in England, on the other hand, offered higher education qualifications at different levels, funded by more than one route, validated and awarded by several authorities, and subject to different quality assurance arrangements.

To curb franchising and prevent any upward drift in the higher level work of English colleges would have required intervention by the state and the intermediary bodies. On the demand side, however, no such action was contemplated. In a context of lifelong learning, with those accessing the expanded system coming from more diverse backgrounds and reflecting more diverse aspirations, the opportunity to enter and exit the system at different points would be of increasing importance. More stopping-off points below the level of the bachelor degree would benefit initial entrants and enable students to return to higher education in later life. In summary, such an approach was believed 'best suited' to meet the needs of the English system, addressing its relative international disadvantage at the sub-degree levels and, by helping to reduce drop out, so maintaining one of the highest first degree graduation rates in the world.

Although government intervention might be needed to ensure that levels of access matched those of competitor countries, the view taken was that 'informed student and employer demand should be the main determinants of the level of participation'. There was no reason for targets and no wish to vary tuition fees or use other incentives to influence the likely pattern of demand. Wherever possible, the choices made by students should be financially neutral as between modes, levels and locations of study. Accordingly, recommendations were made to improve the information available to

students. This would include information referenced to the accessibility, flexibility and affordability of sub-degree higher education in local colleges, features that emphasised the responsiveness of the further education sector.

So that colleges be given the opportunity to develop a 'vibrant and flourishing' sub-degree provision, the Dearing inquiry recommended and the government accepted that the funding of all provision defined as higher education should be the responsibility of the HEFCE. This now included the funding of the higher national certificate which was added to the list of prescribed courses able to be funded by the HEFCE. Some programmes (including an assortment of higher level professional and technical qualifications) remained in the non-prescribed category and, like other courses funded by the FEFC, they attracted a lower level of funding than those supported by the HEFCE.

Over a migration period, the HEFCE planned to incorporate all directly-funded higher education provided by further education colleges into its funding method. Unlike in Scotland, where colleges were funded at a lower level than for equivalent provision in the higher education sector, English colleges would receive similar funding to higher education institutions for provision of a similar cost. With this platform, they were expected to 'deliver the same quality and standards' as higher education institutions (HEFCE, 1999).

As a result of the transfer of funding responsibility, the HEFCE became responsible for funding an additional 50,000 students at another 200 further education colleges, compared to just 70 colleges previously. It also meant that a much larger number of colleges were brought under the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), many of which had little or no previous experience of its requirements and processes. As before, those courses directly funded by the HEFCE were assessed on a subject-by-subject basis. Franchised programmes were the responsibility of the partner higher education institution and, following complaints by universities about the burden of subject review, all indirectly provision came under a new process of academic review. Inspection of non-prescribed courses was overseen by the FEFC.

Along with these changes, the HEFCE offered colleges a choice between three funding options: direct funding; indirect funding; and funding through a consortium of colleges and higher education establishments. Colleges were able, if they wished, to continue with multiple funding routes and, contrary to the Dearing injunction, a strong steer was exercised in favour of collaborative arrangements (franchise and consortium) since these 'best support quality and standards'. How colleges were funded was, according to the HEFCE, a much more complex question than the Dearing report suggested. There were concerns too about the quality of higher education in a small number of colleges leading the QAA to question their 'capacity to deliver such programmes' (QAA, 2000).

With colleges encouraged to enter into indirect funding partnerships with universities and other higher education establishments, there was no control on the level and type of qualifications that might be taught in the further education sector. Although partner higher education institutions top-sliced the funding they passed on to colleges for the

teaching of their courses and modules, there was sufficient margin to attract further education providers into these arrangements. Just how much funding was retained by the higher education establishment, for what services and at what costs, was often not known by the college, or was otherwise difficult to determine. This was a source of tension in some franchise relationships but these were commercial (frequently confidential) agreements and there was no monitoring of them by the funding council. On their side, colleges were keen to diversify their sources of funding as well as provide access and progression routes for their students.

High policy and the foundation degree

By the time the Blair government published its first white paper on higher education, all trace of the Dearing proposals had gone, on the special mission of colleges and much else besides. Now, it was their partnerships with universities and their shared role in delivering a new flagship qualification – the foundation degree – that defined the college role in work-related higher education and higher skills in the workforce.

Further education has strengths in providing ladders of progression for students, particularly for those pursuing vocational routes, and serves the needs part-time students and those who want to study locally. Further education colleges make an important contribution to meeting local and regional skills needs, including through the higher education they provide. We want this significant role to continue and to grow. However, it will be important that any expanded provision is of the high quality that we expect from higher education. We believe that structured partnerships between colleges and universities – franchise or consortium arrangements with colleges funded through partner HEIs – will be the primary vehicles to meet these aims and will deliver the best benefits for learners.’ (DfES, 2003, p.62)

Invented by government and the first prototypes launched in 2001, the two-year foundation degree (and its part-time versions) was intended to redress the historic ‘skills deficit’ at the intermediate levels. By involving employers in its design and operation, by enabling students to apply their learning to specific workplace situations, and by guaranteeing arrangements for progression to the bachelor degree, the foundation degree would, it was anticipated, raise the value of work-focused qualifications. This was the first major new higher education qualification to be introduced in the English system since the diploma of higher education in the 1970s. It was also the first time that a sub-bachelor qualification was styled a degree. In time, the new degree was expected to subsume many of the other qualifications at these levels.

With little evidence of improved demand in the post-Dearing years, ministers came to doubt the capacity of traditional qualifications like the higher national diploma and certificate to deliver further significant expansion. At the same time as bringing in the foundation degree, the Blair government set a participation target of 50% of 18 to 30 year olds in higher education by the year 2010. The new qualification would be funded to provide the bulk of the growth needed to meet this target. On this measure, participation in England was already at 43%. Although much criticised and subsequently amended to

increasing participation ‘towards’ 50% by the end of the decade, the target has been retained. It has since been joined by a commitment to increase the proportion of working age adults with higher education qualifications from the current figure of 31% to 34% by 2011 and 36 % by 2014.

In the early guidance on the foundation degree, the new qualification was expected to be delivered ‘typically’ by further education colleges but this soon gave way to a shared role for universities and colleges in leading this expansion. Fearing that they might become junior partners in this development, some directly-funded colleges – the mixed economy group in particular – lobbied for a national validation system that would avoid them being tied to a neighbouring university. That argument was later accepted when, from 2008, further education colleges with a critical mass and track record of providing higher education were able to apply for foundation degree awarding powers.

Nevertheless, for the great majority of further education providers, then as now, it was their association with a higher education institution (for funding or validation or both) that, in the eyes of government, vouchsafed the quality of the degree. Without that relationship, colleges would find it harder to recruit students to their own higher education, especially those from working class and ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds who were the focus of government strategies on widening participation.

As the white paper on higher education made plain, it was a new qualification, not an alternative provider, that was the chosen instrument to ‘change the pattern of provision’ and ‘break the traditional pattern of demand’ (DfES, 2003). Additional funded places were reserved for foundation degrees and the numbers on bachelor degrees held steady, so that growth would come predominantly from this route. Development funding was also provided for institutions and employers to work together in designing these programmes. If necessary, there would be incentives for students in the form of bursaries that could be used offset the fee for the foundation degree.

The same white paper had proposed the abolition of an up-front flat-rate fee and its replacement by variable fees (up to a maximum of £3000) repaid after graduation through the tax system. It was expected that foundation degrees would be priced competitively in the new market. In the event, nearly all higher education institutions charged the maximum fee and, in most cases, students on franchised courses in further education colleges paid the same level of fee as those in the partner university. Only in the directly funded higher education provided by colleges was there greater variation in the fees charged.

Whatever the impact of fee deregulation on the pattern of university and college providers, recruitment to foundation degrees has matched the growth levels set for the new qualification. This was achieved without measures to offset the costs of the qualification for students, although the degree has been exempted from a recent government decision to withdraw funding to institutions for the teaching of students already holding a higher education qualification. Given that most higher education students in further education colleges were adults who studied on a part-time basis, the

protection offered to foundation degrees did not extend to other areas of their higher level work.

Apart from introducing a measure of variability in the fees charged for full-time undergraduate education, the Higher Education Act of 2004 restored grants for students from lower income families and raised the threshold at which graduates started to repay their fee contribution and maintenance loan. In addition, those institutions that decided to charge variable fees above the standard level, including further education colleges, were required to submit an 'access agreement' to an independent regulator, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). This set out how they would safeguard and promote 'fair access' for under-represented and low-income groups through their bursary schemes and other financial support and outreach work.

Since fees for part-time students were not regulated, the OFFA requirement only applied to a minority of the higher education taught in colleges. Again, where programmes were indirectly funded, these would be covered by the access agreement of the partner university (in which the colleges and their courses may or may not be identified). Where variable fees were to be charged for programmes directly funded by the HEFCE, the college would need to seek approval for its own access agreement. For colleges with plural funding routes, yet another source differentiation and complexity was expressed, with requirements different from those for the main (further education) business of the college.

High policy and the alignment of sectors

Such demands and the pressures placed on collaboration were, by this stage, increasingly acknowledged by government. This included a reference for the first time to the position of 'mixed economy' institutions, whether they were in the further education sector or the higher education sector.

As part of making it easier to form sensible partnerships across the further education/higher education boundary, government will remove unnecessary bureaucracy where provision crosses sectors and will provide equity for both providers and learners. We believe that there are unnecessary difficulties for collaboration between higher education and further education presented by the need to respond to the two different funding council regimes in relation to planning, funding, and data collection as well as the difficulties of juggling the requirements of the two quality assurance and inspection arrangements. Different 'mixed economy' institutions and federal arrangements are developing where the traditional boundaries are no longer relevant or desirable. We will work with HEFCE and the LSC to take forward ways of reducing the difficulties 'mixed economy' institutions currently face as a consequence of operating within two funding regimes. This will include reviewing the administrative and legislative barriers that exist to improve greater integration of systems. (DfES, 2003)

One outcome of this quest was the 'joint progression strategy' developed by the HEFCE and the LSC (with central government) to build pathways between further and higher

education and, more specifically, to advance vocational and workplace progression into and through higher education. As part of this strategy, development funding and additional student numbers were used to create 'lifelong learning networks' (LLNs). Operating across a city, area, region or subject, and 'combining the strengths of a number of diverse institutions', these networks of (mainly) higher and further education providers were expected to bring greater clarity, coherence and certainty to progression opportunities for vocational students.

Ahead of increased turbulence in the market for students and their fees, especially if the limit on variable fees was raised or removed following a review in 2009, there was a need to protect opportunities for vocational progression. Since fewer choices were available to students on vocational programmes than for those on academic routes, there were worries that research-intensive universities might be persuaded to withdraw from the limited progression agreements they currently operated 'while competition intensifies between some higher education institutions and further education colleges' (HEFCE, 2004).

Elsewhere little progress was made in aligning the two sectors, especially their funding and quality regimes. A major area of difficulty was the pay and conditions of service of employees in each sector. Neither the government nor the funding bodies set or prescribed these in further education colleges or higher education establishments. In practice, few attempts were made to harmonise scales, terms and conditions in mixed economy and merged institutions, mainly because of the higher teaching loads in the further education sector and the expectation that most academic staff in the higher education sector would undertake scholarship and research in addition to teaching.

On the other hand, those who taught higher education courses in further education colleges were expected to engage in 'scholarly activity' as part of their professional development. Many taught at both the further and higher education levels. Arrangements varied college by college as to how much time and support was given for scholarly activity, with managers conscious of the potential for resentment from those who compared their situation with staff in higher education institutions and from those who, because they taught only further education courses, did not qualify for these entitlements.

Different too were the smaller class sizes normally found in colleges compared to the mass audiences for lectures in most higher education establishments. Along with the ease of access, articulation and progression made available within a single institution, the scale, support and intimacy of teaching was one of the main claims made for the 'distinctiveness' of higher education in further education colleges, and why such settings were seen as important to widening participation and lifelong learning.

HE in FECs is already a distinctive part of the HE system. While it is dangerous to over-generalise about a diverse system, HE students in FECs are more likely to be over 25, more likely to study part-time, and more likely to come from areas with low rates of participation in HE than students in HEIs. They are more likely to be studying foundation degrees and sub-degree programmes such as HNCs and HNDs.

These distinctive features derive from the particular place that FECs occupy in their communities, and the nature of the FE curriculum on which the HE provision is often based. They lie in the extent to which the FECs' focus on short-cycle HE enables them to offer more higher level learning within a context of lifelong learning, to respond swiftly to skills needs, to deliver programmes flexibly, and to work effectively within a turbulent market. We believe these features constitute a particular strength and should continue to provide the focus of HE in FECs. (HEFCE, 2006, p.9)

Colleges as well as universities received additional funds to meet some of the extra costs incurred in broadening access and improving retention. Where franchise arrangements were involved, these supplements were expected to be included in the funds passed to the college for the teaching of these students. Although graduation rates compared favourably with most other countries, the coupling of access and retention was a core principle in English policies on widening participation. For reasons of efficiency, equity and accountability, incentives and penalties were applied to improve success rates and 'bear down' on non-completion. Alongside variations between subjects and types of institution, there was evidence to suggest that part-time students registered with a higher education institution but taught in a further education college were more likely to continue than similar students in a higher education institution (National Audit Office, 2007).

While the objectives of the funding and quality regimes in each sector might be broadly similar, their methodologies remained very different. Rather than closer alignment between their approaches and procedures, more progress was evident in efforts to view the higher level work of colleges less in its parts and more as a whole. Firstly, a new method of 'integrated quality and enhancement review' was adopted by the QAA so that the direct and the indirectly funded provision in a college could be examined together within a single method of review. Secondly, colleges were required in future to have a strategy for the development and delivery of all their higher education (including non-prescribed provision), irrespective of its size and scope. In their different ways, both were attempts to encourage colleges to address and manage their higher level provision as 'a strategic whole', even though responsibilities might be shared with partner higher education institutions.

The proposal for strategies was one of several that arose from a review of higher education in further education colleges by the HEFCE and a concern that not all colleges were well-placed to provide higher education. In some cases, institutions had been 'opportunistic' in pursuing short-term funding and this had led to 'small pockets' of college-based higher education. There were issues as well about the clarity and transparency of indirect funding agreements and the stability and predictability of funding and student numbers in collaborative arrangements. To support long-term associations between member institutions, it was proposed that colleges with indirectly funded provision were afforded security of funding and student numbers for at least three years. This would strengthen the sustainability of higher education in colleges and allow for long-term strategic investment.

However, it was not just colleges that needed to take a more strategic approach to the development of higher education in the further education sector:

This provision exists at what is currently a funding and institutional boundary in England; it has grown up in a piecemeal way straddling FE and HE, and has rarely been the core focus of any funding body or institution. It has often been neglected in mainstream strategies for HE and FE. This is not just a problem about the HE provided in FECs; rather it concerns access to HE more generally. (HEFCE, 2006, p.5)

High policy and the skills agenda

Equipped with strategies agreed with the funding council in the coming years, colleges would be able to bid to become 'centres for higher education excellence'. These were meant to be 'developmental' and, like proposals for lifelong learning networks, no one model was envisaged. Centres might be formed by a single institution or by several. Higher education institutions were also eligible to bid but only in partnership with one or more colleges. The scale or number of centres was conditional on future funding decisions, with both capital and revenue funding likely to be available.

The aim of this initiative was to maximise the potential for development, innovation and growth of higher education across the further education sector. Although focused on the twin themes of widening participation and employability, the priorities for centres and for the future role of colleges in further and higher education reflected a growing emphasis on 'the skills agenda'. The increasing significance of skills in national policy-making had been marked by the establishment of a new 'learning and skills' sector in 2000 and, in the following year, by a change in name of the lead government department to 'education and skills'.

Tackling the weakness in national performance in basic and intermediate skills was the context for bringing together, for the first time, all forms of funding for post-compulsory education and training outside higher education. The Learning and Skills Council assumed funding responsibility for further education colleges from the LSC, for sixth forms in schools from the local authorities, for government-funded training and workforce development from the training and enterprise councils, and for adult and community learning from local government. To meet its quality standards, the existing inspection systems for colleges and for work-based training were brought together within a single framework. In contrast to the former FEFC and the HEFCE, the LSC acquired powers to plan and co-ordinate provision locally, through a network of 47 local LSCs.

Skills formation was also the context for a 'modernisation' of the role of further education colleges to 'meet the challenge of the knowledge economy'. Central to this vision was a sharpening of the distinctiveness and specialist focus of colleges and central to these objectives was the idea of greater specialisation: 'The need first and foremost for each college to identify what it is best at, and to make that field of excellence central to its mission' (DfEE, 2000a). The modernising of technical and vocational education

sought not just improvement and upgrading of colleges as suppliers of modern skills but the transformation of general further education colleges into specialist ‘centres of vocational education’ (CoVEs). Since 2001, more than 400 CoVEs have been identified, with some colleges gaining this status in more than one specialist area.

Under the LSC, the CoVE programme has been the main means of promoting specialisation and differentiation among and within these colleges. Following, a white paper on further education in 2006, this policy was strengthened to include a requirement on colleges to demonstrate how CoVE status ‘will play a part in defining the mission and purpose of the institution and in driving improvement across the whole institution’ (DfES, 2008). In addition, the LSC was asked to use its planning and funding powers to encourage concentrations of CoVEs in related disciplines in individual colleges: ‘This will contribute to a drive towards specialisation, increase the clarity of focus in the institution and create critical mass so that the combined effect of the CoVEs can be significant improvement across the institution’.

The same white paper agreed with the conclusion of a review of the role of further education colleges in England – the Foster inquiry 2004-05 (Foster, 2005) – that the key strategic purpose and mission of further education was economic, not social: ‘to help people gain the skills and qualifications for employability’. However, an economic mission did not mean narrow vocationalism and, in the provision of higher education, there was an important role for colleges linked to their economic ‘and’ social mission.

This mission is not narrowly about occupationally-specific training, nor only about training people to ... the threshold for employability, centrally important though both of these are. It also extends to broad vocational and general qualifications, often valued most of all by employers. It includes fostering an enterprise culture and, for young people in particular, it must extend to inculcating the values, attitudes and knowledge that society seeks from its citizens. It extends from supporting learners to acquire basic skills through to degree-level education and training to develop very high-level skills, and includes the needs of the self-employed. (DfES, 2008, p.22)

We are clear that within the new mission of the system and the new focus on specialisation, we need to retain breadth of provision. This applies to the system as a whole and, where appropriate, to individual institutions. (ibid, p.28)

In line with this revised mission, there was a presumption that higher education taught in further education colleges should have a strong occupational and employment purpose and, as with the foundation degree, provide progression to higher level qualifications and training. From the beginning, the foundation degree was designed as an exit and a transfer qualification. As a free-standing work-focused qualification it would develop in students ‘the right blend of skills’ – generic, specific and transferable – that employers needed. As a short-cycle qualification, it would ‘lay the basis for widening participation and progression’ (DfES, 2000b).

The foundation degree also occupied a key position in early and later proposals for ‘a new vocational ladder’ spanning secondary and post-secondary education. At the upper

end of this ladder, the foundation degree provided a vocational route into higher education for those qualifying with upper secondary qualifications or through the award of credits for appropriate prior and work-based learning. At the other end, more vocational versions of secondary qualifications or those which combined academic and vocational study opened a pathway to more advanced programmes. From 2008, provision for 14 to 19 year-olds in schools and colleges would be expanded by new diplomas in a number of broad occupational areas. For those gaining these qualifications, progression to the foundation degree and other undergraduate qualifications was something that colleges and universities, through their membership of lifelong learning networks, were expected to support, if not guarantee.

As in their relationships with universities, further education colleges would compete and collaborate with schools to provide the new diplomas. Many colleges already provided programmes for young people in the final years of compulsory schooling under 'increased flexibility' schemes to broaden the curriculum offered to those not attracted to, or accepted for, academic pathways. At any one time, a college might be offering vocational programmes to 14 year-olds in the compulsory system at the same time as delivering undergraduate courses in the higher education system. This range of activities and their various audiences highlighted the accretion of roles and responsibilities which, according to the Foster report, had diluted the original and primary mission of colleges, that of building skills for the economy.

Shortly after accepting the Foster recommendations for colleges, the government published its plan to implement the recommendations of the Leitch review of skills in England (Leitch Review of Skills, 2006; DIUS, 2007). Here, the ambition was to achieve 'world class skills' at all levels by 2020, a strategy that would require 'a culture change' within both further and higher education. Through a demand-led approach, employers and current and future members of the workforce will be treated as 'customers of the skills system'. Employers will be given an active role in the determining the content and delivery of skills. Individuals will be offered flexible training in a way that can be combined with job search and continued alongside work.

The primary vehicle for demand-led funding was 'train to gain', a brokerage service for employers which – for basic skills and lower level qualifications – the state funded in full. This service had already been extended to 'higher level skills' where co-funding with employers was a model still to be tested and developed. In a further elaboration of the English policy experiment, priority in funding for future growth was given to employer-led and skills-focused higher education. New incentives would be available to promote programmes partly or wholly designed, funded or provided by employers, including:

part-time and short-cycle courses; a curriculum that changes more quickly in response to learner and employer demand; a more diverse range of providers, including reinforcement of the role of FE colleges in delivering HE; and new private provision. (DfES, DTI, DNP and HM Treasury, 2005, p.2)

For a three-year period, the HEFCE was asked to support additional employer co-funded places for programmes of work-based learning and those designed or delivered in conjunction with employers. This period would provide ‘a crucial testing ground for establishing good practice and exploring how best to stimulate demand for HE in a range of new markets’. It would also see the expansion of employer engagement projects funded by the HEFCE, including the accreditation of employer-based in-house training at the higher levels (DIUS, 2008).

The principle of ‘combined investment’ applied to yet another set of government proposals addressed to future expansion in higher education, this time the development of ‘higher education centres’ or ‘universities’ through to 2014. Along with widening participation, contributing to social cohesion and enhancing progression, these centres would support the ‘creation of a highly skilled workforce with relevant skills for the local business community’, thereby ‘unlocking the potential of towns and people’ and ‘driving economic regeneration’.

As in proposals for centres for higher education excellence, no single model was proposed, although most would be based (or linked with) existing providers and most would involve collaboration between higher education institutions and between these institutions and further education colleges. During the period of this initiative, it was expected that some further education colleges might gain foundation degree awarding powers. In so doing, they were candidates to lead a proposal for ‘a more focused higher education centre’ but in association with a higher education establishment and other local partners (HEFCE, 2008a).

Collaboration, competition and the college contribution

In this final section, the development of cross-sector further and higher education is reviewed, its patterns of provision and participation are described and, by way of conclusion, some reflections made on the significance and salience of sectors in the English tertiary system. The foregoing account of the policy and institutional history of sector arrangements is focused on those aspects that bear on the combination of further and higher education in colleges of further education and institutions of higher education. While only a broad outline can be given of developments and directions in each sector, the treatment of sector rules, regimes and relationships is necessarily more specific.

This is because higher education below the level of the bachelor degree and beyond the higher education sector is an unfamiliar world to most politicians, policymakers and researchers. At the time the Dearing inquiry ventured into these areas, it was still usual to speak of ‘sub-degree’ higher education. It is only in recent years that the term undergraduate education has been detached from the English ‘honours’ or ‘first’ degree and applied to all the qualifications (certificates, diplomas and degrees) that populate the levels and varieties of undergraduate education. It might be only a few who can recall or recount the origins of prescribed and non-prescribed higher education but, for present-day

colleges and universities, such distinctions exercise a major influence on what can and cannot be funded in each case.

When Trow cast a transatlantic eye on English further and higher education in the middle years of 1980s these demarcations had yet to be inscribed in legislation. As a long-time observer and admirer of British arrangements, he was nonetheless struck by the disconnection of further and higher education, especially the problems this posed for expansion and the emergence of a more diverse mass system. Trow was not alone in underestimating the diversity of the English system, not just in the respective contributions of the universities and the polytechnics, but also the extent of the higher education taught in colleges and the density of the access relationships linking providers of further and higher education. For Trow, the links he observed were:

all small-scale, rather experimental steps, many under attack and on the defensive. What is lacking is the broad recognition that all degree-granting higher education is only a part – of course a central part – of a system of post-secondary and continuing education ...

With the local authority role in higher education in retreat, the argument for a closer association between further and higher had to come from elsewhere:

But who is to do that, in the absence of strong popular demand? Not, I think, the institutions of higher education, or the political parties, or industry, for different reasons. And that is why I do not think it will happen. (Trow, 1987, p.291)

Twenty years on, relationships have become closer, more numerous and more varied, but without further education colleges being included as part of the higher education system and in ways that fell short of integration and harmonisation of the two sectors.

Features of the English experience

Five features of this short yet curious and complicated history are highlighted, both as a reminder of the basic contours of further and higher education and to point to continuities and specificities in the English experience. First are the deep ironies and powerful paradoxes posed by the formation of sectors under one set of conditions and their survival under another. The architectures created in 1988 and 1992 were intended to concentrate higher education in specific types of institution, separate them from other kinds of tertiary education and organisation, and treat them differently. These arrangements were the culmination of efforts during the binary era to develop strong institutions that would be capable of teaching to the same standards as the established universities.

Established at the point of take-off to mass levels of participation, these same structures were then expected to support the drive to near-universal access and, importantly, the development of a distributed system of higher education, with further education and the workplace as settings for new and diverse forms of provision. In this more fluid and

dynamic environment, sector structures continue to define separate funding, quality, information and reporting systems for further and higher education. They continue to contain and control the movement of institutions between sectors, and set its direction. In the absence of pressures to converge their methodologies, non-alignment has slowed or prevented progress on the introduction of overarching frameworks, such as for qualifications and – most difficult of all – for credits.

On the other hand, sector separation has proved no barrier to cooperation, collaboration and competition between the institutions in each territory. Whether bidding for resources or responding to government initiatives, a common requirement is that colleges and universities demonstrate their collaborative commitments and credentials. Such has been the growth in the number and types of relationships that many institutions have now looked to streamline or prioritise their partnerships. Nor have sector rules restricted the arenas in which further and higher education compete for students. Nor have sector authorities sought to regulate the use of indirect funding agreements, although there are codes of conduct covering franchise and consortia arrangements.

A second feature of this period has been uneven and unstable development of policy addressed to these areas. One clear example is the near-exclusive focus on colleges in the further education sector and the low policy interest, collectively at least, in higher education sector establishments that combine postgraduate, undergraduate and further education. The small number of these institutions in the higher education sector and their reasons for holding or acquiring further education – merger, transfer or specialisation – made them less likely to attract the attention of governments, at least not in public statements.

Policy development was uneven as well in respect of the higher level work in the further education sector. The policy silence and avoidance that accompanied this provision after the 1988 and 1992 settlements was understandable, given that the new divisions and territories produced by these reforms owed more to specific and immediate priorities than to any overall plan for the post-secondary system. What remained in the further education sector was officially declared residual and, with the removal of the local authorities and the demise the national inspection system spanning advanced and non-advanced further education, there was less understanding of the changes brought about by mass expansion, including the impact of franchising.

When the Dearing inquiry aimed its recommendations on growth at the further education colleges, the task of developing policy was passed mainly to the HEFCE. In performing this task it has struggled: partly because of the large number of providers with small amounts of provision, funded in various ways; and partly because any measures directed at colleges had to take account of policies for the rest of the higher education sector and for a larger further education sector in which it had no other involvement or responsibility. Moreover, this was no ordinary policy environment but one characterised by a constant churn of reviews, strategies and initiatives, albeit punctuated by some radical reform measures. Although the skills agenda has assumed increasing importance, what stayed the same was an expectation that colleges would make their distinctive

contribution on several fronts: renewing growth, widening participation and enhancing progression as well as majoring on vocationally oriented higher education.

The failure to evolve a consistent and coherent policy was acknowledged by the HEFCE in its review of this activity in 2006. Out of this review came a set of interventions to encourage a more strategic approach to higher education by colleges themselves alongside proposals to bring more stability to arrangements governed by indirect funding. Here was an approach that sought both to respond to wider policies and pressures for differentiation in further and higher education as well as exert its own influence on how colleges were regarded and handled. The mixed economy group of colleges, most of them directly funded and therefore better known to the HEFCE, were already in line for distinctive treatment. They were the group from which the first applications for foundation degree awarding powers were expected to come and they were among the likely candidates to lead proposals for new higher education centres. At the other end of the scale, some of the colleges with the smallest amounts of higher education were expected to find it difficult to produce a strategy that would meet the required criteria, leading to their likely withdrawal from higher level work.

That left a large middle category of colleges which had medium to modest amounts of higher education. In some cases, this was a mix of prescribed, non-prescribed and franchised programmes. A large number were members of regional partnerships and federations and funding consortia, most based on indirect funding. Franchise agreements were wide ranging in size, composition and scope, reflecting relationships from open and democratic through to detached and directed. For these establishments, their collaborative arrangements were expected to be long-term associations between member institutions. The proposal that indirect funding agreements should provide for stability and predictability was another example of differentiation, this time bringing partner universities into the policy as well.

The situation of small and medium providers of higher education underlined a third feature of the college contribution, one obvious but fundamental to an understanding of the ways that such provision was organised and managed at the institutional level. For both further education colleges and higher education establishments, their primary attachment was to one sector and their relationships with another sector were different in kind and intensity.

Among the higher education institutions, this was the case even though further education students might outnumber those studying at the higher education levels. According to official statistics⁵, there were five higher education institutions with a majority of students enrolled on further education courses and another five where more than a third of the total were further education students. The pattern was both different and similar to that in the further education sector: different in that a vastly greater number of institutions was involved in higher education and no college had a majority of its students studying at these levels; and similar in having the largest numbers of students from outside their sector concentrated in a minority of colleges and higher education establishments. Fewer than 70 further education colleges taught more than 500 higher education students,

whether funded directly or indirectly by the HEFCE. The other three-quarters of colleges – 220 in total – accounted for the rest, with around 70 colleges having less than 100 higher education students.

On the ground, the way colleges managed these numbers, often with the addition of students on non-prescribed programmes funded by the LSC, differed widely. In some institutions, the organisation and location of further and higher education was separate, with a campus, building or other space dedicated to higher level work. In other colleges, higher education students were taught in some of the same classrooms as further education students. Similar to the resentments sometimes expressed between teachers, there were complaints at times from students on higher education programmes about shared facilities with further education students, especially in relation to study, library, catering and leisure facilities. Where courses were franchised to a college, access to the resources of the partner university might a feature of collaborative arrangements.

However, it was at the senior management levels that the scale of the higher education activity relative to the ‘core business’ of the college was of major significance. Even where the higher level work was sizable, it might not feature fully or centrally in the strategic planning and management of the institution. This was particularly evident where higher education programmes were dispersed across the college, with no one person or part of the college responsible for their coordination. This had implications for the capacity of colleges to deal with the different funding, quality and reporting requirements of higher education, especially if this involved plural funding arrangements and multiple franchise partnerships. Both the new QAA review method for colleges and the new requirement for higher education strategies were attempts by the central authorities in higher education to confront these difficulties.

Nevertheless, it was nearly always the case that the demands of the LSC, and behind and through that body the directives of government, would shape the priorities of the college. In recent years, performance targets and other government interventions to identify and deal with ‘failing’ institutions have pressed on the future of colleges, with mergers encouraged in some instances. At the time of their incorporation in 1993 there were 465 colleges. Fourteen years later, there were 378. Merger has been an important tool to eliminate financial weakness in colleges, along with occasional closures. Lacking clear boundaries to define their role, colleges in the learning and skills sector compete for students in two major markets: the education and training of the 16 to 19 population; and the teaching and training of adults. For every activity undertaken by colleges, there has been an alternative provider.

Except for the sixth form colleges enrolling mainly recent school-leavers, these two markets or constituencies have been long-standing in the case of general further education colleges and some of the specialist institutions. Following the decline of apprenticeships and day-release courses in the 1970s, many colleges expanded their full-time academic courses of upper secondary education, especially the A-level qualification. Part-time versions of these programmes were offered to older students and, typically, these sat alongside a larger programme of short courses for adults. As a result of

changing funding priorities determined by central government, general and uncertificated courses were increasingly expected to be self-funded and, along with provision for 16 to 19 year-olds, skills-related and certificated programmes in defined areas were targeted for funding by the state.

Over time, the general further education colleges have come to supply the three main access routes into higher education and so highlighting a fourth feature of the English experience. Although centre-stage in this paper, the higher education provided by further education institutions is one of two major ways that colleges contribute to education and training at the higher levels. The other is the large number of qualified entrants they transfer to undergraduate education at universities and establishments of higher education and the much smaller numbers they qualify for entry to their own courses of higher education.

These ‘qualifying’ and ‘providing’ functions were represented in the technical education of the early colleges and they featured in the diversification and expansion of colleges into more general providers. After 1988, the further education sector was relieved of its providing duties, at least a good many of them, and was recast as a qualifying environment. After 1997, its providing role was recovered and its preparatory and qualifying programmes were expected to secure internal progression and external transfer.

The largest and best known of the three access pathways offered by general further education colleges was the A-level track, with admission to full-time bachelor degrees normally based on passes in three subjects at specified grades. Bachelor programmes were also the chief destination of adults who used ‘access courses’ to return to study and prepare for higher education. For students taking a vocational route, their national diplomas and certificates gave them access to undergraduate courses at all levels, usually at institutions – the newer universities in particular – with programmes in the same technical or professional areas.

The college contribution to undergraduate entry is then a core activity. In England, students whose previous educational establishment was a further education college account for over a third of all full-time entrants to undergraduate education in higher education sector institutions⁶. The majority of these had studied previously at general further education colleges (55%), compared to 40% at sixth form colleges and 6% at specialist colleges. Unlike entrants from sixth form colleges and schools, two out of five entrants from general colleges were adults. The general colleges also supplied the highest number and proportion of entrants to full-time courses below the bachelor level although, as elsewhere, this was a small fraction (14%) of their entrants to higher education institutions. While overall tariff scores for A-levels were lower for entrants from general further education colleges than from sixth form colleges and schools, the general colleges qualified and transferred a higher proportion from the lower socio-economic groups.

The combination of qualifying courses and higher education programmes in most general further education colleges and the same in certain higher education establishments, gave

force to the view that mixed economy or dual-sector settings should be central in efforts to increase and broaden participation in undergraduate education. Such a view rested on the assumption, reflected in policy pronouncements, that the juxtaposition of further and higher education in a single institution would favour strong, smooth and ‘seamless’ forms of internal progression. For all this, a fifth feature arising from this twenty-year history is a pattern of provision that is complex, a rate of growth that is slow, a pattern of progression that is uneven and a contribution to participation that is intricate and involuted.

Sector profiles and patterns

As a result of trends and patterns that took shape under binary and post-binary conditions, one sector has retained a near-exclusive focus on higher education and another, currently the learning and skills sector, has providers responsible for education and training at all levels of further and higher education. Among the former are a minority of institutions that combine further and higher education. Among the latter are a set of further education colleges, all of which prepare and transfer students to higher education, many with access and progression agreements with individual universities, and most with some provision at the higher levels. While only a tiny proportion of further education is located in the higher education sector, there is a larger overlap and overlay of higher education in the learning and skills sector but with no clear or tidy pattern to this provision.

One impact of sector separation and the franchising of higher education courses to further education colleges is that data on students and programmes has to be assembled from different sources. In the case of one of these, the individual learner record of the LSC, the coverage and quality of data on non-prescribed higher education is less than reliable, especially as to the level of these qualifications. In published data this sub-set is frequently omitted. When included, it is often for internal policy purposes, as in the published and unpublished data brought together in Table 1.

At present, around 11% of domestic higher education students in England are taught in the further education sector. In the higher education sector, those enrolled on further education courses represent approximately 3% of the student population in the college component of post-16 education and a smaller proportion again of the total number of ‘learners’ in the learning and skills sector. This is the extent of the overlap between the two sectors and the proportions have been of this order for at least the last ten years. During this period of high policy for college-based education, and in spite of (or partly because of) the measures directed at this zone, the share of higher education in the further education sector has not increased:

In spite of our commitment to the role of HE in FECs and a number of policy initiatives, including development funding and the introduction of foundation degrees, the volume of HE in FECs has at best remained static and may be declining. We do not know why this is and we are currently analysing the data. It may be the result of market forces, but it may be due to some of the organisational and

administrative complexities of funding, partnerships, and capital allocations.’
(HEFCE, 2006, p.7)

Table 1: UK domicile higher education students by level of study and location of teaching, England, 2005-06 (thousands)

	Undergraduate	Postgraduate	All students
Higher education institutions			
Prescribed courses	1018.3	256.3	1274.6
Non-prescribed courses	215.1	49.9	265.0
All courses	1233.4	306.2	1539.6
Further education institutions			
Prescribed courses	54.0	3.2	57.2
Prescribed franchised courses	47.0	4.3	51.3
Non-prescribed courses	41.4	2.5	43.9
Unspecified non-prescribed courses			28.9
All courses	142.4	10.0	181.3
All institutions			
Prescribed courses	1119.3	263.8	1383.1
Non-prescribed courses	256.5	52.4	308.9
Unspecified non-prescribed courses			28.9
All courses	1375.8	316.2	1720.9

Source: HEFCE and LSC (2007); HEFCE (2007)

These complexities are great and, arguably, have served to confuse or obscure the identity of the college contribution to higher education. The bulk of this contribution is part-time, short-cycle, vocational and at levels below the bachelor degree, with some at the honours level and a small amount of postgraduate education. The funding for this provision is mainly from the higher education funding council: direct from the HEFCE for prescribed courses (32%); indirectly from the HEFCE for franchised programmes (28%); and from the LSC for non-prescribed courses and qualifications (40%).

Where the overlap is largest, at levels below the bachelor degree, slightly more of this provision is still found in the higher education sector where the diploma of higher education and the certificate of higher education are qualifications specific to this sector. Nearly all courses leading to the part-time higher national certificate and a majority of those leading to the full-time higher national diploma are taught in the further education sector. In the case of the foundation degree, the flagship qualification for future growth, the provision is shared, with 44% taught wholly or

partly at higher education institutions (the majority part-time) and 56% wholly at further education colleges (the majority full-time). This qualification was taught at 260 further education colleges compared to 93 higher education establishments (most of the latter representing former PCFC institutions).

In 2004-05, the HEFCE provided funding for higher education in 287 colleges and for the teaching of over 104,000 students. Although the fastest growing qualification, the foundation degree accounted for just 10% of these students, compared to 44% taking the HND and HNC, and 22% studying on bachelor degrees. Business and management studies were the most popular subjects in all these qualifications, followed by creative arts and design in the bachelor degree and HND and education studies in the foundation degree. In the HNC, most students were studying in one of the engineering disciplines and recruitment to architecture, building and planning was slightly more popular than business and management studies. Courses at the postgraduate levels were mainly in education.

Between 2002 and 2005, some 90% of the programmes in further education colleges reviewed by the QAA received 'confidence' judgements in respect of academic standards, and 99% received 'commendable' or 'approved' judgements in respect of the quality of learning opportunities. In contrast to the view taken by the QAA in its early years, its report for this period:

bears testimony to the many and varied strengths of HE in FECs. There is much to celebrate and there is also a range of matters to be addressed to enhance students' learning. There is considerable scope for increasing the sharing of experience between the colleges and their partner HE institutions. (QAA, 2006, p.2)

In addition:

Colleges are addressing national as well as immediate local and regional needs. In many cases, employers and professional bodies have informed curriculum development. This is evident in the linking of theory and practice demonstrated, for example, in live employer-led projects.

Colleges can be proud of their achievements in widening participation in HE and the considerable value they add for many of their students. (ibid, p.1).

Given the part-time nature of much of the provision and the limits this placed on data coverage and analysis, the college role in widening participation was easy to assume but harder to demonstrate. Nevertheless, the available evidence was strong. According to the HEFCE, the proportion of first year undergraduate students receiving a weighting in its widening participation allocations was higher in further education colleges (at 25%) than in higher education institutions (at 19%) and, according to government estimates, around 55% of students who completed a two-year full-time HND went on to study for an honours degree (DfEE, 2000b).

The HND was designed as a free-standing vocational qualification and, along with most other qualifications below the bachelor degree, was taught exclusively by the polytechnics and further education establishments. During the 1980s and into the expansion years, the qualification increasingly functioned as an intermediate award, offering students the possibility of transfer to the honours degree and providing an access route for those with weaker or non-standard entry qualifications. In this way, the selectivity of the bachelor course was preserved while access was widened to undergraduate education.

In the absence of a national credit framework, and depending how far the content of the HND and bachelor degree were aligned, students might transfer to the first, second or final year of the honours programme. Without a parallel or top-up degree, students studying in further education colleges had to transfer to another institution, usually a polytechnic. In later years, a number of colleges established their own top-up programmes, with validation by a higher education establishment with taught degree awarding powers.

Unlike the HND, the foundation degree was designed to afford smooth progression to the bachelor degree within a minimum period of time. Since it was also a work-focused qualification developed with employers, the government was keen to emphasise its closeness to employment and its link to career advancement. These dual functions captured, in one qualification, the potential for democratisation and diversion in college settings. In the context of the English policy experiment, funding for places on foundation degrees in preference to those on honours courses represented a deliberate attempt to steer demand towards new forms of short-cycle higher education, albeit with options to continue to the bachelor level.

In light of the importance attached by government to the foundation degree, its development has been closely monitored, including the collection of longitudinal data on the background, performance and progression of the early student cohorts. Higher proportions of entrants from low participation neighbourhoods were taught in further education colleges compared to higher education institutions and the proportions were higher for students registered at colleges compared to those on franchised programmes. Almost half of the students gained their qualification within the expected course length and about a quarter were still studying. Of those completing their foundation degree, just over half (54%) immediately progressed to an honours programme.

Evidence on the outcomes for students, including salary levels and job quality, was too early to assess. Information was available however on support from employers suggesting that only a minority of students, even part-time students, had their fees paid by their employer, or received any other financial support: 'This underlines the challenge of the employer engagement programme, to develop provision to which employers will be willing to make a contribution significantly greater than the fee' (HEFCE, 2008b).

Foundation degrees, along with the other higher level qualifications offered by further education colleges, were expected to benefit from progression arrangements matched to courses and qualifications at the further education levels as well as to the bachelor degree. Such a view betrayed a lack of familiarity with the types of higher education programmes provided by colleges, some of them targeted at specific groups of employees recruited direct from the workplace and not already studying at the college delivering the qualification. The interfaces between further and higher education were often configured in quite different ways and, as a consequence, rates and patterns of progression varied considerably within and between further education colleges. Indeed, an expansion of work-focused higher education had placed new demands on the access and transfer functions of these institutions.

Sector interests and asymmetries

Without substantial growth in the size and share of higher education provided by further education colleges, and with no segment of undergraduate education under their ownership and control, there has been little pressure from this quarter to review relationships between the two sectors, certainly not to question their basis. Even with the expansion and special mission for colleges anticipated by the Dearing inquiry, the committee saw no reason why separate funding and regulatory arrangements should be changed. The justification offered at this time, and repeated ahead of the creation of the LSC, remained essentially the same. In the view of the scale and complexity of further and higher education, and the need for a funding body to relate effectively to them, there was a clear need for separate funding bodies. While there might be scope for more cooperation, a single agency would, it was claimed, be too large to work properly or to represent the range of interests adequately.

Nor did the cross-sector distribution of sub-degree education in England favour giving funding responsibility for this provision to a further education funding body. This option was supported for Scotland, especially by those who regarded this provision as 'essentially advanced further education, by virtue of its local delivery and largely vocational nature'. Set against this, the inquiry recommended that 'the English model' prevail in England and Wales since:

only this could force a consideration of the relative costs of similar provision across all the providing institutions, be they in the further or higher education sector; that this would place the enhanced responsibility for funding sub-degree provision squarely alongside that for other higher education; that it would not confuse delivery of sub-degree higher education by the Further Education Funding Councils; that it would be essentially a tidying-up of the current arrangements; and that the development of the sort of sub-degree qualifications with value which we advocate ... could only be achieved within the higher education context. (NCIHE, 1997, p.355)

For the bodies at the centre of these arguments, the FEFC and the HEFCE, only the latter expressed a view about the merits of dual or single arrangements and the division of funding responsibilities:

There has been discussion from time to time about the creation of a single body responsible for funding both higher and further education. The rationale for such an arrangement is strengthened by the increasingly diverse nature of post-secondary education and training, the breaking down of barriers between academic and vocational education and training, and the increase in modular provision, with students taking modules at different levels.

However, despite this overlap and synergy, the FE and HE sectors remain largely distinct in institutional and academic terms, and further blurring of levels and current distinctions would not be helpful. In particular, it would be a matter of concern if it led to an upward mission drift by FE colleges. Moreover, the amount of funding and the span of responsibility, from post-GCSE [General Certificate of Secondary Education] through to world class research, would be too great for a single organisation to manage effectively. Cooperation between FE and HE funding councils in strategic matters is in hand and should bear increased fruits in future. On the other hand the largely national and international role of HE requires a single national overview, within which regional and local interests can be managed. (HEFCE, 1996, p.23)

Apart from their rehearsal in public of arguments and sentiments normally reserved for private exchanges, what these statements illustrate is the extent to which, despite the breakthrough to mass levels of participation, those working in further and higher education did not feel themselves to be engaged in a common enterprise. As well, they illuminated two other observations made by Trow during the pre-expansion years: namely, the absence of strong popular demand or advocacy sufficient to put such a matter on the agenda for discussion; and the manifest inequalities in the relationship of higher and further education.

Both before and after the publication of the Dearing report, support for a larger and distinctive role for colleges in higher education was muted or missing. None of the major parties – the FEFC, the employer organisations and not even the national representative body for colleges – came behind the Dearing recommendations. In the hands of the HEFCE, the proposals were challenged and replaced by measures that led to a more dependent set of relationships based on indirect funding. The general response was one of ambivalence, along with disinterest, suspicion, cynicism and some outright hostility. Whatever the merit of the proposals, they were presented without the solid base of evidence and analysis that accompanied some of the other main inquiry recommendations. Not only were the proposals a surprise, they soon fell victim to weak demand and government impatience with both sector: the pace of change in higher education and the problems (including financial scandals) that beset post-16 education and training.

Adding to this ambivalence and uncertainty was a failure of government departments to signal and affirm that higher education was a normal and necessary part of the mission of

colleges. Not only was it a national committee of inquiry into higher education that sought to make policy for institutions in another sector. Running alongside the Dearing review was an internal inquiry into widening participation set up the FEFC – the Kennedy inquiry – which also presented its report to a new Blair government (FEFC, 1997). In outlining a vision for an inclusive further education sector, the report was innocent of the higher education provided by colleges and its role in access and participation. Neither inquiry had formal contact with the other nor at any point did they exchange evidence, argument and proposals.

Nor was government support for an enhanced role for colleges transferred and translated into the world of further education and its sector bodies. In statements of policy and strategy in this sector, it was the qualifying rather than the providing role of colleges in higher education that was given prominence and priority. Confirmation and clarification of the higher education mission of colleges ran counter to policies aimed at specialisation and focused mission for general further education colleges. It was not until 2006 that a government policy document on further education acknowledged that colleges already played an important part in higher education and that there was a growing role for this provision. Before that, it was statements from the government directorate on higher education and a range of guidance from the HEFCE that constructed the college contribution to undergraduate education.

Acceptance of another of the Dearing recommendations – extending the list of prescribed courses to include the HNC – meant that responsibility for most of the higher education in the further education sector passed to the HEFCE. However, the main duty of the higher education funding council was to allocate funds in the form of a block grant to universities and other establishments in its own sector, some of them powerful and influential players within and beyond the academy. The relationship between the HEFCE and these autonomous institutions was necessarily different from that between the FEFC and the LSC with further education colleges. In contrast to the funding bodies for further education, which were less able or willing to mediate government policy, the HEFCE was able to exercise an influence on policy formation as well as its elaboration and implementation.

The chief executive of the HEFCE had always been a former vice-chancellor and drawn from the older universities. By contrast, those appointed to the FEFC and the LSC came from outside the ranks of college principals: from local government, from business and, not insignificantly, from higher education. The chief executive of each body had a seat on the board of the other council and, occasionally, this was an opportunity taken by the HEFCE to ‘fly a kite’ in relation to an undiscussed area of policy.

In 2002, the minister had written to both chief executives asking them to explore how the two councils might better work together to achieve ‘integrated policy development, planning and delivery’. Although each council operated within a different statutory framework, with only the LSC equipped with planning powers, the two bodies were asked to address the ‘barriers’ to partnership posed by different funding and quality systems and, more adventurous, the criteria to consider future structural and

organisational models bridging further and higher education. The impetus for joint effort was the planning and delivery of growth towards the 50% target and the engagement of employers in course development and cost-sharing. As the major outcome of this collaboration, the joint progression strategy was the forum where the HEFCE and the LSC considered boundary matters, such as how best to deal with non-prescribed higher education and the role of each body in 'higher skills'. These exchanges stimulated the LSC to produce, for the first time, its own strategy on higher education but, in the government consultation paper on higher skills, it was mainly to the higher education sector that policy was once more directed.

Day to day, this asymmetry of power and influence was reflected in the relationship between the HEFCE and the nearly 200 colleges it directly funded in the post-16 sector;

Our role is only to fund one or more HE programmes, which will always be a minority of the institution's activity.

and

There is also a question of proportion. We cannot realistically achieve the same depth of relationship with a further education college which may offer only a handful of HE places as with a university offering tens of thousands of places. Given the constraints on our staff resources, we may keep in contact with many FECs through collective meetings in regional seminars. (HEFCE, 2001a, p.23)

Bureaucratic imperatives as well as sector interests, affinities and identities played their part in influencing how the higher education funding body interpreted and managed its relationships and responsibilities in respect of the colleges. From the beginning, and especially after it assumed responsibility for funding the HNC, the need for the HEFCE to deal with such a large number of small providers was a requirement that stretched its organisational capacity and intelligence. It placed additional demands on policy development, on data collection and on its regional teams whose first priority was the higher education institutions inside the sector. Colleges with directly funded courses, especially the larger providers, might get to know the HEFCE officers in their region but, for courses funded indirectly, their relationship was with the partner university, not the funding council.

Whatever the quality, maturity and spirit of the relationships between colleges and universities in indirect funding arrangements, for most further education establishments these semi-compulsory partnerships had become a condition of future funding. Even with the prospect of greater transparency and stability in funding agreements, these were relationships of dependency in a competitive market for students and services. Here was another reason why sector arrangements were highly functional for one sector and less so for the other. Franchising was a means by which student numbers could be moved between higher education establishments and their partner colleges in way that allowed for expansion under conditions of growth and for the return of these numbers to universities during periods of contraction or intense competition.

The preference for structured partnerships had implications for the capacity of colleges to build the quality and sustainability of their higher education. By making the partner university the awarding body and responsible for all aspects of the quality of the student experience, the intention was to safeguard standards. At the same time that government was encouraging some further education institutions in the direction of self-regulation, one of the consequences of this policy was to place colleges in a dependent relationship, rather than one of ownership and proper accountability for the teaching it provided. For reasons to do with its own history and status as much as sectoral and institutional subordination, further education institutions had still to be widely accepted as normal and necessary locations for higher education.

At issue then in indirect (but also in direct) funding arrangements was the sustainability of higher education in the further education sector and the need for a staged approach to build quality and ownership in the higher education mission. A two-sector system made this difficult to achieve since, among the central authorities, there was no body or sector with overall responsibility for the strategic development and well-being of higher education in further education. Structurally, such provision was betwixt and between: a minority activity in one sector and the secondary responsibility of another; and owned or managed by neither. Given a market approach to funding in both sectors, colleges were under increasing pressure to maximise and diversify their sources of funding, with implications for the coherence of their curriculum, organisation, identity and mission. In particular, their equity and skills agendas were not easily reconciled.

Again, in preserving a division between the two sectors, the importance of safeguarding the quality and standards of English higher education should not be underestimated, whether that required monitoring the quality of the student experience, bearing down on non-completion or controlling the reputational range of institutions. In a global market for students and faculty, any risk to the reputation or brand of English universities and their degrees was a serious matter. By having colleges outside the higher education sector and by regulating the numbers, powers and titles of those inside the sector, there was an important role for the state in marking and policing this boundary. That courses of higher education might be offered in organisations and settings beyond this boundary was less an issue if tied to the awards of a higher education institution or if the provision was local, part-time and serving domestic students. Most of the qualifications offered in these locations were at levels below the bachelor degree, the qualification that defined the Bologna first cycle, and therefore less visible and open to international comparison.

On the other hand, migration movements were bringing international students into further education and individual colleges recruiting and teaching globally. Awarding powers for foundation degrees and for areas outside the national qualifications framework were likely to stimulate new and wider markets for the services of further education colleges. Higher education was now a distributed system and the two sectors more closely resembled overlapping and intersecting zones, rather than functionally separate territories. Further education, once the name for a common system of advanced and non-advanced education, had become a holding category for upper secondary and tertiary

institutions in a learning and skills market, most of them pursuing multiplying and competing goals.

After 2010, sixth form colleges will have a legally distinct status and will be separated from the rest of the other colleges. As a result of the establishment of a new pre-19 sector and a new post-19 sector, the general and specialist further education colleges will need to relate to three rather than two main sector bodies: the local authorities for work with young people; a new skills funding agency for work with adults and employers; and the higher education funding council for work at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. In the consultation document outlining these changes, a further education college is defined as an education establishment offering 'anything' from basic skills to A-level qualifications, higher nationals and foundation degrees. As an indication of its indeterminate nature and status, further education is variously described as a 'sector', 'system' and 'service'.

The planned extension of the compulsory phase, together with an expansion of higher education and training for adults in the workforce, will reshape the landscape of tertiary education in England. For colleges providing higher education, a demographic downturn in the number of young school-leavers over the next decade and a possible raising of the cap on variable fees will be expected to produce sharper competition and another spell of turbulence. Such conditions will test the protection which lifelong learning networks were intended to give to vocational pathways and the security of funding and student numbers proposed for collaborative funding agreements. Amidst these struggles and uncertainties, the boundary work of sectors will exercise its own influence on patterns of further and higher education, assuming that these categories survive the next wave of policy language.

Notes

1. The study is one of seven projects on widening participation in higher education funded by the Economic and Social Research Council within its Teaching and Learning Research Programme. Using a three-level design, the FurtherHigher Project investigated the influence of the division between further and higher education on strategies to expand participation and promote progression in English undergraduate education. 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 dual-sector establishments were combined with interviews with senior managers. At the micro level, fieldwork was conducted with students and staff at four case study institutions. This paper draws on the analysis of more than 400 policy documents and statistical sources together with the findings from 14 interviews with senior officials and policy officers in government and the sector bodies.

2. Unless otherwise indicated, the academic year for all statistics is 2005-06 and student numbers are for those studying in England and domiciled in the United Kingdom.

3. For international and comparative perspectives on post-compulsory systems and structures that include England and Scotland see, for example, Gallacher and Osborne (2005) and Tapper and Palfreyman (2005).
4. A number of think tanks and similar organisations have sponsored debates on the funding and structure of post-compulsory education that include comparisons of sector and student funding. See, for example, Piatt and Robinson (2001), Piatt (2004) and Corney and Fletcher (2007).
5. Fieldwork with four partner institutions in the FurtherHigher Project has led us to question the accuracy and reliability of some of this data.
6. These and other figures on undergraduate entry are taken from evidence submitted to the Foster review of the future role of further education colleges in England.

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