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Further Education Colleges and Higher Level Skills and Qualifications

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Introduction

Within national and regional systems of post-secondary education, institutions styled community, technical or further education colleges confront competing opportunities and pressures. On the one side, globalising economies demand higher levels of education, training and skills from those of all ages and backgrounds, with colleges prepared to extend the range and reach of their vocational, academic and general programmes. On the other, modernising governments use legislation and the market to promote greater diversity, responsiveness and distinctiveness among their tertiary institutions, with colleges expected to distinguish their mission and profile from one another as well as from universities, schools and training organisations.

In the case of further education colleges in England, these movements find their expression in policy conditions that favour competition, specialisation and the reshaping of publicly funded provision in line with national priorities. Among the nearly 400 colleges in the further education sector, some already have focused missions based on specific areas of activity or particular types of student or both. Around 100 'sixth form' colleges mainly provide full-time academic courses for young people intending to enter higher education. Another 40 or so colleges are 'specialist' establishments and focus either on specific curriculum areas (such as art and design and land-based subjects) or cater mainly for adults ('specialist designated institutions' or 'external institutions').

The remainder – the majority (around 250) – are 'general' further education colleges. These offer academic, vocationally oriented, occupationally specific and general education to young people and adults at a range of levels (from basic literacy and numeracy through to higher education) and in different modes and styles. Within this group and the specialist institutions are 30 or so 'mixed economy' colleges that provide significant amounts of higher education. Although not recognised as a separate category in official statistics, the scale of their higher level work is in contrast to the small pockets of higher education found in most general further education colleges.

That a college might be offering vocational programmes to 14 year-olds in the compulsory system at the same time as teaching adults on

undergraduate courses highlighted the broadening of mission and roles which recent governments have sought to curb. Accordingly, general further education colleges have been pressed to cultivate a specialist – vocational – identity and gain recognition as centres of vocational excellence. Most now have at least one vocational specialism for which they are regarded as a centre of excellence locally, regionally and nationally. In future, a new and higher standard of accreditation is to be set for centres of vocational excellence, involving a more direct role for employers and collaboration with national skills academies as part of this drive for specialisation.

Not only do colleges in the further education sector vary considerably in size, shape and character, they 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 is an alternative provider. School sixth forms, private training organisations and higher education establishments all offer courses in the same areas, although few match the spread of work found in most colleges. At the same time, they collaborate with schools to provide courses for 14 to 16 year-olds, with universities for the validation and teaching of higher education programmes, and with employers for work-based training.

The focus in this paper is on the two main ways that further education colleges in England contribute to higher education and the development of higher level skills and qualifications in the workforce. The first has to do with their role in preparing and progressing qualified entrants to undergraduate education at universities and other establishments of higher education and, where offered, at colleges of further education. The second has to do with their role as providers of higher education and higher level qualifications, either in their own right or in partnership with higher education institutions. Not all colleges are involved in higher level work but most prepare, qualify and transfer large numbers of students to programmes of higher education and training.

To aid comparative understanding, this sketch of English arrangements is written with an American audience in mind. Although their history, organisation and operation are very different, there is renewed interest in comparing the responses of American and English colleges to more competitive conditions for recruiting students and faculty as well as attracting public and private resources. In both countries, the performance of colleges in improving access, achievement and retention, their accountability for public funds, and their engagement

with employers and the needs of the economy are matters of growing importance and scrutiny. So too are concerns about the coherence of college goals, the compatibility of their employability and equity agendas, and the pressures on college budgets.

There is no attempt here at systematic comparison, except to note the overlapping boundaries and similar curricular functions performed by each set of institutions: their collegiate (academic and general) education; their vocational (technical and occupational) programmes; their developmental (remedial and basic) education; and their courses of adult, community and continuing education. Whereas community colleges owe their origin to the access they afforded to the lower divisions of higher education, further education colleges began as institutions of technical education and only later offered courses of academic, general and liberal education. General further education colleges have since been urged to recover their original 'economic' mission while community colleges have, over a long period, expanded their occupational programmes. Nevertheless, both maintain a long-standing 'social' purpose to serve minority and disadvantaged populations.

An examination of English policies, patterns and trajectories is also a reminder to domestic readers of the rapidly changing landscape of further, higher and work-based education in England: one characterised by complexity, ambiguity and growing uncertainty; and one not always or easily captured in standard accounts. Mention is made too of the directions taken in the other countries of the United Kingdom, especially since political devolution at the end of the 1990s. In Scotland, where the volume of higher education taught in further education colleges is greater, post-devolution policy has diverged from that in England in a number of respects.

The main reason for reporting largely on England is the radical nature of the reforms directed at further and higher education in that country over the last ten years. These bear directly on the role of further education institutions in developing new forms of work-focused higher level education and training. More than that, they involve further education colleges in a major policy experiment aimed at changing the pattern of future demand for English undergraduate education.

The English experiment

Mass levels of participation in English higher education were the result of a spectacular period of expansion during the late 1980s and early

1990s. Rather than repeat the pattern of mass expansion, which saw establishments of higher education and their full-time bachelor degree courses taking the bulk of new entrants, government policy for the next phase of growth in undergraduate education is concentrated on the sub-baccalaureate levels, with further education colleges invited to play a leading role in the teaching of higher-level, short-cycle, vocational qualifications. Around one in nine of all higher education students are taught in further education settings and, in future, an increase in their number and proportion is sought.

A deepening crisis of funding had brought the earlier expansion to an abrupt halt in the middle of the 1990s. Both the decline in the unit of resource for undergraduate teaching and the refusal of the treasury to continue to underwrite the costs of student support exposed the limits of existing methods to finance a mass scale of higher education. Thereafter, funding policy has been based firmly on the principle of cost-sharing. For education and training at the higher levels of qualification, where the average private rates of return are stronger, students and employers are expected to make a greater contribution to the costs of provision. Nevertheless, central government will remain the principal funder of both higher and further education and, where necessary, controls and incentives applied to influence the supply of courses and demand for qualifications.

Differentiating and diversifying the purposes, activities and funding of universities and colleges are strategic responses to another feature of the English transition to a mass phase. In 1992, at the height of expansion, the binary line between university and non-university institutions was abolished. For the first time, polytechnics and other major establishments of higher education were granted degree-awarding powers and were able to use the university title. Alongside the establishment of a unified sector of higher education, a new sector of further education was created. This separation of further education colleges and higher education institutions into discrete sectors was intended to acknowledge the different levels and types of work associated with these establishments. Less than a decade later, the same two-sector system is the context for an expanded college role in higher education and a break with the model of the traditional honours degree.

A leading role for colleges

This subsequent approach and larger policy experiment have evolved in three main stages. Initially, colleges were expected to meet most of

the new growth in short-cycle undergraduate education and, over time, thereby become the primary providers of higher national diplomas and certificates. Furthermore, it was proposed that colleges be funded directly to undertake this 'special mission', rather than indirectly through franchising agreements with higher education institutions. However, they would still need the services of a university or national examination body to validate and award the certificates, diplomas or degrees they offered.

Direct funding was originally preferred because it meant that all providers of higher education were publicly funded at similar levels for similar types of provision. In a franchise relationship, the higher education institution retained part of the funding to meet the costs of its oversight of the teaching undertaken by the college. During the peak years of expansion, franchising enabled some of the fastest growing higher education establishments to continue to expand when their own campuses were full to capacity. For colleges, it was a source of additional income, bringing higher education to some for the first time and strengthening their role in widening participation.

Although little acknowledged, the example of Scotland was an important influence on this aspect of English policy. The higher participation rate in Scotland (44%) compared with England (33%) was attributed, in part, to the wide scope there to study short-cycle work-related higher education qualifications in further education colleges. In Scotland, these higher national qualifications were part of a modular and unitised framework of advanced and non-advanced vocational education that enabled directly-funded colleges to develop a strong and distinctive tradition of higher level education, largely independent of higher education institutions.

As in Wales, college-based higher education had been the slowest part of the English system to expand during the growth years. Indeed, without franchising, the share of English higher education taught in further education colleges would have declined. In Scotland, by contrast, colleges rivalled the growth rates achieved by the higher education institutions, accounting for over a quarter of the higher education population, compared to around 12% in England. Unlike in England, where franchising diversified the range of higher education in further education and led to small pockets of provision in some colleges, the pattern in Scotland was for most colleges to have a significant volume of higher level work, almost all directly funded and only at levels below the bachelor degree.

England aimed to follow Scotland in limiting the college contribution to qualifications at these levels, even though some of the larger college providers of higher education already offered bachelor degrees and, in a few cases, postgraduate programmes. The bachelor degree in England is usually a three-year qualification for students studying full-time. In Scotland, it is generally a four-year qualification and the preserve of higher education establishments. England did not follow its neighbour in funding this provision at a lower unit of resource, mainly because English higher education institutions – principally the new universities – still accounted for the majority of short-cycle undergraduate education.

England was on its own again after 1999 in charging students an up-front flat-rate fee for full-time undergraduate education and in replacing grants with loans. Fees had for long been charged for part-time undergraduate courses and, for some students, the employer covered all or part of the costs of study. The new Scottish Parliament and the new Welsh Assembly looked to other – less controversial – methods of funding their higher education institutions and students. In England, the fee policy was applied to all levels and types of full-time undergraduate education. Although wishing to expand higher education in the further education sector, colleges were required to charge the same level of fee as competitor universities. Colleges were given priority however in the allocation of additional publicly funded places for renewed growth.

A new short-cycle qualification

A combination of weak demand for sub-baccalaureate programmes, concern about quality and standards in a small minority of colleges, and ambivalence about according further education an exclusive role in higher education at these levels led to new reform measures aimed at raising the status, profile and relevance of higher level vocational qualifications. Alongside the announcement of a 50% target for participation in higher education in England by the year 2010, the government introduced a new flagship qualification – the two-year work-focused foundation degree – that would be the main vehicle for reaching or moving toward the 50% target.

The foundation degree is based on a partnership between degree-granting higher education establishments (who award the qualification), employers (who contribute to its design and development) and colleges (who typically though not exclusively 'deliver' the programme). Although planned to be the standard two-

year qualification in English higher education, it is meant to be offered in a variety of modes (part-time, full-time and mixed) and settings (colleges, universities and the workplace). Existing sub-baccalaureate qualifications, such as the higher national diploma and certificate, will gradually be incorporated into the foundation degree framework.

When first announced, the foundation degree was described as akin to the American associate degree but since then it has acquired some distinctive characteristics. The new degree is required to function as a transfer qualification (offering progression to the final stages of the bachelor degree) as well as a terminal qualification keyed to the needs of employers in specific occupational areas. The emphasis given to the transfer or the exit function has varied, although the goal of tackling skills shortages in the economy and employment has been paramount. Indeed, its main purpose is to meet skills needs at the associate professional and higher technical levels where, according to official forecasts, jobs are likely to experience considerable growth in coming years.

High performing colleges with vocational specialisms and strengths at the appropriate levels are therefore well-placed to contribute to the growth and development of foundation degrees. Yet, most are now expected to do this on the basis of structured partnerships with universities, with colleges funded indirectly through franchise or consortium arrangements. Such partnerships, the government argued, would help stimulate demand for the foundation degree and establish its currency. Direct funding might still be appropriate in some instances where niche provision is offered or where there are no obvious higher education partners. Even so, colleges seeking additional funded numbers have still to meet criteria including critical mass, their track record on quality and standards, and the nature of such provision. Following this second policy turn, further education colleges are no longer viewed as the preferred or primary location for short-cycle undergraduate education, or for the new qualification.

Apart from the government-led skills strategy to which all colleges, universities and schools are expected to make their contribution, further education colleges are also at the heart of strategies to widen participation in undergraduate education. The accessibility of local colleges, their tradition of working with employers in the community, and their history of providing access and alternative routes to higher level education made them obvious locations for the foundation degree. For students completing their foundation degree in a college and wishing to continue their studies to the bachelor degree there are

not only progression agreements with partner universities but, in some cases, 'top-up' arrangements within the same college.

In building academic transfer into the design of the foundation degree, those responsible for the new qualification were conscious of how the higher national diploma, originally conceived as a terminal vocational qualification, had also become a staged or intermediate qualification offering progression to the bachelor degree and beyond. More acute was the realisation that, without broad opportunities for access and progression, there was a risk that diversion rather than democratisation might result from a policy of steering new (working class) demand away from the bachelor degree and the more selective universities: an echo of long-standing debates in the United States about the tracking and transfer functions of community colleges.

The foundation degree has been adopted in Wales, where much less higher education is found in the further education sector and where, from the outset, franchising has been the preferred model of funding college-taught undergraduate education. Here, as in Northern Ireland, the new qualification is strongly identified with efforts to broaden the social base of participation. In Scotland, reform of the structure of higher national qualifications has been the chosen path and the foundation degree is not offered by Scottish institutions of further and higher education. With a larger proportion of its higher education at levels below the bachelor degree and most of it provided by further education colleges, the opportunity for Scottish students to transfer to a four-year institution is a matter of strategic and social importance.

An emphasis on progression and employer engagement

In England, economic imperatives have assumed increasing significance in the policy push for skills development and employer-led education and training. The most recent measures addressed to expanding and changing demand for higher level education are focused on two areas: improving progression and transfer; and increasing employer engagement and investment. Both are key elements in a long-term strategy to ensure that the workforce in England is equipped with world-class skills at all levels. In addition to the target to increase participation in higher education towards 50% of those aged 18 to 30 by 2010, there is now a target for at least 40% of the working age population to possess a higher level qualification by 2020. At present, the rates for each stand at 43% and 30% respectively.

In respect of progression and transfer, some 28 lifelong learning networks have been established to bring together further education colleges and higher education institutions in new forms of collaboration that combine the strengths of diverse institutions. Operating across a city, area, region or subject, they are intended to bring greater clarity, coherence and certainty to progression opportunities for vocational students. Given that nearly all those acquiring academic (A-level) qualifications now enter higher education, the networks are an attempt to increase the number progressing from vocational pathways where only about a half currently move in this direction.

General further education colleges already provide many of the main vocational qualifications at these levels and, from 2008, they will launch – with schools – a new set of diploma awards for 14 to 19 year-olds. The latter are the latest in a long line of broad vocational qualifications occupying a middle-track position between a large and culturally dominant academic track and a small apprenticeship route. Like their less than successful predecessors, they are designed to raise participation and attainment levels up to the age of 18 and, alongside A-levels, offer a route into higher education. It is intended that colleges and schools join in consortia to provide the diplomas while continuing to compete with each other for recruitment to A-level programmes. Although these new awards will carry a similar number of tariff points as A-levels, the diploma pathway is likely to feature strongly in progression to the foundation degree, at least in the early years.

No less controversial have been government efforts to promote employer engagement and workforce development. With no statutory entitlement to workplace training in England, employer-led sector skills councils have been created to develop vocational qualifications and both employers and employees are able to access government support for adult skills training. At the lower qualification levels, including literacy and numeracy, there is full public funding. Even at the higher levels, an element of public subsidy is anticipated, if only to trigger development. To this end, public funding for colleges has been redirected at skills-focused and work-based training and the number of publicly funded places provided on courses that do not lead national qualifications has been correspondingly reduced.

Underpinning this voluntary approach is the idea of a 'demand-led' system, where employers and individuals are given the purchasing power to decide which sort of training is best suited to their needs. For employers, demand-led funding of adult training will increasingly be

channelled through a skills brokerage service to help them assess their training needs and identify how these will be met and by whom. To prepare for demand-led conditions, a new standard for employer responsiveness and vocational excellence has been set for colleges. At the same time, intervention will be sanctioned in areas where market-led approaches are deemed not be working as well as to remove inadequate and under-performing provision.

The brokerage service will extend to the higher levels of education and training where matched public and private funding is expected to support programmes tailored to individual businesses and that are accessible in ways that suit employers and employees. Likewise, there are incentives to promote higher education programmes partly or wholly designed, funded or provided by employers. While foundation degrees will remain the main source of publicly funded growth in undergraduate education, colleges and universities are able to apply for additional funded places to meet new demand stimulated by lifelong learning networks and by workforce development projects. For the first time, employer co-funded places are also available to support expansion.

Policies for progression look to deeper partnerships between colleges, schools and universities. Those for employer engagement anticipate a more diverse range of providers competing for the custom of businesses of all sizes. On both fronts, there is a reinforcement of the higher education role of further education colleges. As a result of a recent review of college-based higher education, proposals have been put forward to strengthen the capacity of colleges to develop sustainable and high-quality provision at the higher levels. In future, each college will be required to produce a strategy justifying the nature and extent of its 'distinctive' involvement in higher education. This stipulation is partly intended to dissuade some small providers from continuing with work at these levels. Where a strategy is approved, colleges will be eligible to bid to be centres for higher education excellence, bringing capital and revenue funding to those selected.

Another recommendation arising from the review is that colleges with indirect funding agreements should have security of funding and student numbers for at least three years. This proposal and the rationale provided for lifelong learning networks are examples of attempts by government to stabilise the environment for higher education in areas vulnerable to its competition policies for colleges and universities. A partial deregulation of fee levels for full-time

undergraduate education in 2006 and the prospect of further relaxation after 2009 prompted counter-balancing measures to protect vocational progression on the one hand and prevent short-term fluctuations in indirect funding on the other.

Separate sectors of further and higher education

As highlighted by ten years of policy reform and controlled experiment, one of the defining characteristics of tertiary education in England is the organisation of further education colleges and higher education establishments into separate sectors. Further education colleges – along with school sixth forms, training organisations and adult education providers – are publicly funded, planned and monitored by a national learning and skills council operating through a network of 47 local learning and skills councils. The learning and skills or post-16 sector was established in 2001 and replaced the smaller further education sector composed of general, specialist and sixth form colleges.

The 380 or so further education colleges constitute the largest part of the learning and skills sector and, somewhat confusingly, it is common for them to be grouped and described as a further education system or sector. There are a number of private further education establishments offering courses leading to national qualifications. These receive no public funding and are located outside the sector.

In contrast to most institutions in the higher education sector, further education colleges do not award their own qualifications. Whatever the level of the qualification taught, it is normally awarded by external examination bodies. The higher education programmes they teach are validated and awarded by institutions holding degree-awarding powers or, in the case of some higher level qualifications, by national and professional awarding bodies. Much to the surprise of colleges and universities, the government in 2007 gave further education institutions the right to apply for powers to award the foundation degree. Only colleges with a critical mass and track record in higher education (the mixed economy group) are expected to meet the criteria set down for these powers.

Colleges are also teaching-only institutions. Institutions of higher education are variously research-intensive or teaching-intensive but all are funded, through their block grants or their quality ratings or both, for some level of research activity. This difference is reflected in the conditions of service of staff in each sector, although teaching-only

contracts are now found in many universities and a reduction in teaching duties is sometimes offered to college tutors who teach higher education programmes and who need to demonstrate evidence of scholarly activity. In general, staff in further education colleges do more teaching and enjoy less standing than lecturers in higher education establishments.

In the higher education sector, some 130 universities and other higher education establishments are publicly funded by their own funding council and the standard of their undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications is monitored by a quality assurance agency for higher education. Because its member institutions are formally autonomous, the higher education funding council has the power to fund but not to plan the provision of higher education. The great majority (over 100) of institutions in the sector are universities. Since 2004 it has been possible for higher education institutions in England and Wales to be granted the university title without first having its own research degrees. Previously it was necessary to secure both taught and degree-awarding powers. At present, there is only one private university in the English system and a small number of other organisations have recently acquired taught degree-awarding powers.

The number of students taught in the further education sector is nearly double that in the higher education sector (Table 1). Given that some of those enrolled on adult, community and work-based learning programmes are taught by or in association with colleges, but enumerated separately for funding purposes, then around four million students are served by further education colleges, compared to two million in higher education institutions. A large majority of the college population study part-time whereas less than half do so in the universities and other establishments of higher education.

There is also an overlap of levels between the two sectors. Nearly 100,000 students are enrolled on further education courses offered by some 40 higher education institutions. Most have modest amounts of further education but a few – usually universities which have merged with further education colleges – have more further education than higher education enrolments. Some of the largest universities in England are a result of such mergers. The further education provision is funded by the learning and skills council and its quality is assessed by an inspectorate for schools and post-16 education.

Table 1: Students in further education colleges and higher education institutions by mode of study, England, 2005/06 (thousands)

	Full-time	Part-time	Total
Further education colleges			
General further education colleges	724.2	2100.4	2.824.5
Specialist colleges	23.6	161.5	185.1
Sixth form colleges	145.1	63.0	208.1
External institutions	16.3	367.4	383.7
Total	909.2	2692.3	3601.4
Higher education institutions			
Total	1196.2	855.4	2051.6

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency, Learning and Skills Council

In the further education sector, roughly 180,000 students are taught on higher education courses leading mainly to undergraduate qualifications ('prescribed higher education') and higher-level professional qualifications ('non-prescribed higher education'). The former are funded directly by the higher education funding council or indirectly by individual institutions of higher education that choose to sub-contract the teaching of some of their programmes to colleges. The latter are funded by the learning and skills council and come under the inspection arrangements for the post-16 sector. Previously, direct and indirectly funded courses were assessed separately by the quality assurance agency for higher education. Now an integrated quality and enhancement review process is applied by the agency.

At present, some 140 colleges are funded directly for their prescribed higher education. A much larger number (around 260) receive funds indirectly, mainly through partnerships with one or more higher education establishments or, for some, through funding consortia. Only half of these are dependent on indirect funding. Others draw on both direct and indirect sources. Where courses are funded directly,

the college is able to decide on the level of fee to be charged. Where programmes are funded indirectly, it is the higher education institution that will determine the fee level, with or without consultation with the college. The introduction of variable fees after 2006 led to nearly all higher education establishments charging the maximum allowed fee for full-time undergraduate courses. This was less the case for directly funded programmes in colleges where there was more competition on price.

Another aspect of plural funding arrangements is that the regulations governing prescribed higher education in colleges do not allow these institutions to receive direct funding for short and flexible forms of provision, such as might be required by employers to enhance the skills and knowledge of their workforce. Funding for this kind of provision is allowed and available to higher education establishments. In these circumstances, colleges could seek indirect funding for such work but, as in all franchise relationships, some of the funding would be retained by the higher education institution to meet the costs of its quality assurance.

These are some of the many complexities that arise from the separate funding, quality and data collection regimes for further and higher education. Unlike American community colleges which are part of a common if differentiated system of higher and post-secondary education, the English further education colleges and higher education institutions operate within a two-sector system. Only occasionally are they regarded as part of a common enterprise. Furthermore, responsibility for the development of higher level education in the further education sector has rested mainly with the central authorities for higher education and its funding council in particular. Nor has higher education been a major concern of the learning and skills council, except where boundary matters or institutional mergers have required its attention. An unease and ambivalence about expanding the college contribution to undergraduate education is not exclusive to the higher education sector. Viewed from a transatlantic perspective, higher education in these settings has yet to be accepted as a normal and necessary feature of a mass system.

Perhaps the most striking illustration of sector division has been the failure to develop a single qualification and credit framework for English further and higher education. Each sector has its own architecture and nomenclature of levels; and in neither has credit been accepted or adopted as a measure of learning. There is little here, and elsewhere, to compare with the currency of credit in the American

system, the diversity of its institutions, the place of general education in the undergraduate curriculum, and the amount of mobility afforded to (and taken by) its students. That said, cross-sector partnerships and alliances have proliferated, with access, progression and transfer assuming increasing importance in the drive to extend participation and diversify the mission of colleges and universities.

The qualifying and transfer functions of further education colleges

Finally, consideration is given to the scale and scope of the qualifying and transfer functions of further education colleges and, by way of conclusion, some of the uncertainties that surround their future shape and direction are reviewed. Before that, the use and meaning of such terms in the English and American contexts are briefly reviewed, both to test understandings and to indicate commonalities and differences.

In preparing and qualifying students for undergraduate education and enabling them to achieve higher education qualifications within the same institution or beyond, English further education colleges perform similar collegiate and transfer functions as American community colleges. While state-level responsibility for public community colleges has promoted a variety of models, including examples of community colleges teaching the full baccalaureate degree, the customary pattern has been for two-year colleges to transfer students to four-year institutions.

If by collegiate function is meant the opportunity to take credit-bearing courses accepted by universities for transfer to the upper divisions of higher education, the equivalent function in further education colleges is the study and completion of short-cycle undergraduate programmes that give progression to the middle or final stages of the bachelor degree. Yet, this is one of two sets of collegiate and transfer functions exercised by English colleges. The other is the preparation of students for entry to the front-end of undergraduate education which, for the great majority, will involve transfer to a university or another type of higher education institution. Although the first of these functions has assumed more significance with the shift to mass higher education and the introduction of the foundation, it is the second which is a core function of all colleges.

The reasons for this are historical and structural. In England, the three-year full-time honours degree has been the preserve of establishments of higher education. With no tradition or concept of a

general baccalaureate degree (except in the Open University), and without the modular-credit structures to facilitate student mobility and transfer, the bachelor degree was a relatively self-contained and linear phenomenon. While the former polytechnics led the move to modularisation, there has been no system-wide development of a credit framework or credit culture across post-secondary education.

The specialist nature of much bachelor education and its selective entry requirements contributed not only to high graduation rates but discouraged attempts at broadening the upper secondary curriculum in schools and colleges that served as a specialist subject preparation for subsequent undergraduate education. As a result of expansion and competition, many universities are less selective than previously yet government policies aimed at widening participation carry with them an insistence that high rates of completion be maintained. For students not to complete their studies in the minimum expected time is still regarded by the central authorities as a sign of failure, on the part of the institution and the student.

Nevertheless, further education institutions – primarily the general further education colleges – have been in the van of developments to widen access to higher education. Unlike sixth form colleges and school sixth forms, they qualify students on each of the three main recognised entry routes to higher education: A-level qualifications; vocational qualifications; and access courses for adults. For young people, A-level qualifications are the standard and by far the largest pathway to undergraduate education. Vocational qualifications at these levels are both general and specialist, attracting students from a wider range of backgrounds and transferring them into employment as well as higher education. Access courses are just one of the ways that older students can demonstrate their ability to benefit from higher education. In some cases, their prior work and life experience is accepted as a basis for entry, especially for part-time and short-cycle programmes.

At present, over a third (37%) of full-time entrants to undergraduate education in higher education establishments come from the college sector, the majority from general further education colleges (55%) compared to 40% from sixth form colleges and 6% from specialist colleges. Unlike entrants from sixth form colleges and from schools (state and private) who are nearly all under the age of 20, two out every five entrants from general further education colleges are adults (half of them aged 21 to 24 and the rest between 25 and 60).

General further education colleges also supply the highest number and proportion of entrants to full-time undergraduate courses at levels below the bachelor degree (the higher national diploma, foundation degree and diploma in higher education in particular) although, as noted earlier, these numbers are much smaller than for their entrants to the honours degree. More students (mainly adults) from these colleges enter higher education institutions with their highest entry qualifications other than A-levels and more attend the newer (less-selective) universities, compared to those in sixth form colleges and schools.

In part, this pattern is a reflection of the lower overall tariff scores for A-level entrants from general further education colleges than from sixth form colleges and school sixth forms. General further education colleges have a higher proportion of their entrants from lower socio-economic groups (34%) compared to 25% in sixth form colleges and 8% in private schools. As a proportion of all entrants from these backgrounds, those from general further education colleges contribute nearly a quarter and the bulk of the rest come from state schools.

A small number of these students stay in the same further education college to undertake their higher education. Others join these programmes while remaining in employment. Given the accessibility to local students, their mainly short-cycle and part-time modes, their vocational orientation and their lower entry requirements, there is evidence to suggest that higher education programmes offered by further education sector colleges attract a larger proportion of 'widening participation' students than higher education sector institutions. For example, the proportion of first year undergraduate students receiving a weighting in the widening participation allocations allocated to institutions (in recognition of the extra costs involved in their recruitment) was higher in further education colleges (at 25%) than it was higher education institutions (at 19%).

Moreover, increasing numbers of students on sub-baccalaureate programmes now look to continue their studies to the honours degree, either by progression within the college or by transfer to another institution. According to official estimates, around 55% of students who completed a two-year full-time higher national diploma went on to study for an honours degree. A similar proportion of students completing the new foundation degree are also taking advantage of negotiated and guaranteed arrangements for progression and transfer to the bachelor degree, sometimes with bridging elements to ensure a smooth transition.

Such has been the character and extent of the college engagement with higher education and training. How this role might evolve in the short and medium term is not clear. Three areas of uncertainty are signalled, some with implications for the whole college and not just its work at the higher levels.

The most immediate issue confronting colleges and their planning is the impact of the decision to create two new government departments concerned for education. The previous department for education and skills has been replaced by one for innovation, universities and skills and another for children, schools and families. Colleges do not appear in the title of either department and responsibility for their funding is split between the two: local authorities (rather than the learning and skills council) will now allocate funds for 16 to 18 education under department for children, schools and families; and a new or revised machinery will distribute funds for the 'post-19 skills landscape'.

This new division will also bear on a second zone of uncertainty and ambiguity, that of responsibility for policy and strategy on higher level skills. The remits for higher education and adult skills now fall within one government department. However, the higher education funding council is the lead agency for much of this work and, whether or not the learning and skills council will continue in operation, there is still the question about how colleges will fare in the public-private market for higher education and workforce development; and whether they should assume more ownership and control of their higher level provision in line with proposals for self-regulation.

How these two matters are managed will be critical to a period of greater potential turbulence after 2010 when a combination of demography and reform of fees policy are likely to sharpen competition between colleges and the 'recruiting' universities. After peaking in 2010-11, the number within the 18 to 20 age group will decrease significantly, by more than 12% over the following decade. These conditions will be a severe test of measures intended to protect vocational progression and those designed to bring more stability, trust and transparency to indirect funding relationships. As in a previous decade of demographic decline, adults will be re-discovered and targeted as audiences for higher education. This time, much more of their higher education will be conducted in and around the workplace, a context that should suit the organisation and culture of many colleges.

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