

Combining Further and Higher Education: Policy, Organisation and Progression

Colleges and universities that provide both further and higher education are a key component of government strategies to expand participation in English undergraduate education. They are sometimes styled dual-sector or mixed-economy institutions. They belong to one sector but some of their programmes are the responsibility of another. Our project examined three aspects of what we call 'furtherhigher education': national policy formation; organisational development; and student progression.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Separate funding and quality regimes for further and higher education have evolved despite the lack of a developed rationale for a two-sector system. | → | Further and higher education need to be regarded as parts of a common enterprise, with mechanisms to recognise and support this. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Policy development for dual-sector education is uneven and unstable, and is led by the sector bodies for higher education. | → | Further education colleges have still to be widely accepted as normal and necessary locations for higher education. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The primary attachment of an institution is to a sector, and relationships with another sector differ in kind and intensity. | → | Dual-sector organisations do not have a specific mission, and a dual-sector identity is less evident than in some other systems. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Decisions to combine further and higher education are only partially informed by widening participation strategies. | → | Equity and skills agendas are not easily aligned, but require strong and strategic coordination. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The interfaces between further and higher education are configured in different ways and do not necessarily enhance internal progression. | → | An expansion of work-focused higher education will place new demands on the access and transfer functions of dual-sector institutions. |

The research

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

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

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

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

The project set out to explore seven main research questions:

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



Figure 1: Summary of the project

- In what ways can current policy and practice be improved?

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

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

Policy

Following acts of parliament in 1988 and 1992, colleges in the further education sector came to be identified almost exclusively with qualifications at levels below higher education, even though most continued with some higher level programmes, including those franchised to them by higher education establishments. Our policy interviews indicated that the new divisions and territories produced by these legislative changes owed more to specific and immediate priorities than to any overall plan or vision for the post-secondary system. Nor has a developed rationale for a system differentiated by sectors emerged in subsequent years. How the English system combined, connected or separated its tertiary sectors was rarely an explicit concern for government or its agencies.

This remained the case despite a shift in policy after 1997 that looked to a larger role for further education colleges as providers of higher education in their own right. Regarded previously as a residual

function, the college contribution to undergraduate education was now elevated to high policy. However, no coherent policy for dual-sector education has appeared. While further education in university settings has attracted little official attention, the failure to develop a durable policy for higher education in further education colleges has prompted a recent review of the arrangements underpinning this provision.

Over these years, policy has moved and mutated, but not in ways that brought clarity or legitimacy to the college contribution. There is evidence in our research to associate this lack of policy progress with the differing perspectives and competing interests that arise from sector separation. In practice, much of the lead role in evolving and implementing policy was given to the funding council for higher education. Under the learning and skills sector, this interest grew but then retreated. In other words, it was the central authorities for higher education that were able to shape policy and practice for part of the work of institutions in another sector. These and other examples point to strong asymmetries in policy approaches and processes for dual-sector education.

Organisation

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

The organisational map is complex. Around 140 further education colleges are funded directly for their higher education and around 260 receive funds indirectly for higher education, mainly through partnerships with one or more higher education establishments or, for some, through funding consortia. A significant number draw on both direct and indirect sources. When validation and quality arrangements are included, together with membership of lifelong learning networks, the picture becomes more complicated again.

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

A variety of rationales served to explain these configurations and trajectories, but in most instances decisions to embrace duality were only partially informed by widening participation strategies, or by the scope for student progression. At the corporate level, market-related considerations were often the most powerful drivers. Whereas a merger was sometimes a powerful factor in creating dual-sector universities, collaboration with higher education institutions was an important means by which many colleges could access additional funding. Some partners were chosen on the basis of proximity, others on reputation or responsiveness. Franchising was an attractive option where student numbers were small because it shared the risks of fluctuating recruitment.

Progression

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

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

Our four case study institutions suggest evidence to the contrary, or rather they show that rates and patterns of progression vary considerably within and between our examples. Only one of these establishments had strong and smooth progression as a clear strategic goal, and it was the only one to brand itself a dual-sector institution. Two of the other case study institutions were keen to exploit the potential for aligning or bridging their further and higher education. In one, specialisation created opportunities for vocational and academic forms of progression and at the other, the decision to invest in a strategic alliance with one higher education partner encouraged

Major implications

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

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

While dual-sector organisations in the higher education sector owe their origins to specialisation, merger or redesignation, further education colleges have often acquired their higher education in less planned ways. Within the learning and skills sector, a differentiation is emerging between: a minority of colleges with sizable amounts of mostly directly-funded higher education (the self-styled 'mixed economy group'); and

a large majority which teach small amounts on behalf of partner universities. Some higher education in colleges is long-standing, and all undergraduate programmes come under the scrutiny of the same quality assurance agency as for higher education establishments. However, these locations for higher education are not widely known or universally accepted.

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

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

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

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

another look at progression.

In our fourth partner institution, where undergraduate education had expanded successfully and purposefully over many years, progression was often understood and valued in terms of students leaving its further education for other providers of higher education. Staff were sometimes genuinely puzzled by variations in

progression in their own institution. We also found tutors and their students more than aware of the reputational differences that shaped choices and transitions in English higher education. High-achieving students in particular were often supported and encouraged to look elsewhere for their undergraduate education.

Further information

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

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

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

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

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

In addition, a series of working papers will be published on each of the main parts of the project.

The warrant

Our findings are based on an analysis of policy documents and statistical sources, over 40 interviews with senior officials and managers in sector bodies and institutions, and 200 interviews with students and 45 interviews with staff in our four case-study organisations. Fieldwork visits and interviews took place in 10 dual-sector establishments in the further and higher education sectors. The project was informed by a growing academic and international literature on relationships between colleges and universities in tertiary systems.

Features of our methodology strengthening confidence in our findings include:

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

Project website:

www.sheffield.ac.uk/furtherhigher

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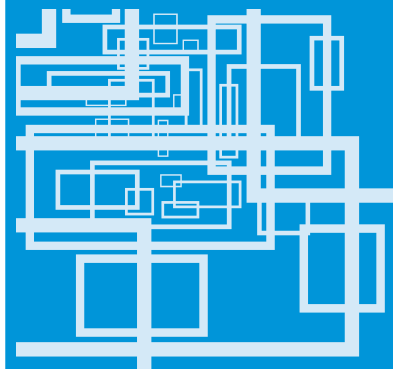
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