College higher education in England 1944–66 and 1997–2010

Gareth Parry[*]
University of Sheffield

As a contribution to the history of higher education in English further education colleges, two policy episodes are sketched and compared. Both periods saw attempts to expand courses of higher education outside the universities. In the first, ahead of policies to concentrate non-university higher education in the strongest institutions, efforts were made after 1944 to recognize a hierarchy of colleges, with separate tiers associated with different volumes and types of advanced further education. In the second, soon after unification of the higher education sector at the beginning of the 1990s, all colleges in the further education sector were encouraged to offer higher-level programmes and qualifications, with a reluctance or refusal on the part of central government to plan, coordinate, or configure this provision. The two episodes highlight very different assumptions about what types of institutions should be involved in what kinds of higher education. They are a reminder too of how short is the policy memory on higher education within modern-day governments and their agencies.

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Introduction

For more than sixty years, further education institutions have featured prominently in the growth of English higher education, in the broadening of its social base, and as the wellspring for additional universities. The importance of such contributions has been suitably highlighted, especially the selection and promotion to university status of the colleges of technology and, later, the polytechnics and the institutes of higher education. Outside these senior institutions, the higher education provided by as many as 300 other further education establishments has been less documented and discussed. They remain a relatively hidden part of the history of higher education in England.

At two points in this history, central government policies for higher education have taken a special interest in the role and capacity of these establishments, many of which provided only small amounts of higher education alongside their other courses. The part-time, local, and highly distributed character of much of this higher education was among the reasons, at various times, for its low priority and profile in national policy. In both periods, the policy intention was to strengthen the place of further education institutions in supporting growth and diversity in higher education, and to meet the needs of industry and the labour market for young people and adults with higher-level vocational skills and qualifications.

The first of these periods, from the second half of the 1940s through to the middle of the 1960s, involved efforts by central and local government, assisted by regional bodies, to recognize a hierarchy of further education establishments. Each category or tier was broadly defined by the volume and type of advanced work and the catchment area for its students. The second and more recent episode involved a reversal by government of decisions made to designate

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* Email: g.w.parry@sheffield.ac.uk

separate sectors for higher education and then confine this level of provision to one sector. These positions changed after 1997. Since then, all governments have sought to expand higher education in the further education sector.

In the intervening years, from the late 1960s through to the early 1990s, a binary policy was pursued with the aim of concentrating non-university higher education, especially full-time courses, in a limited number of strong centres, mainly the polytechnics. The object was to develop these institutions as large and comprehensive institutions, so helping to meet the mounting demand for higher education within the further education system. Centred on the polytechnics, a distinctive sector of local authority higher education would thereby complement the universities. However, as a result of the rationalization and reorganization of the colleges of education in the 1970s there emerged a new set of colleges of higher education that would also figure in moves to concentrate provision in the non-university sector.

Under these binary and polytechnic policies, the idea of a tiered pattern of colleges soon fell away. With an increasing share of demand taken by the polytechnics, especially during the dramatic expansion of the late 1980s and early 1990s, these institutions had grown into national institutions. In 1988, they and other large higher education establishments were established in their own sector of higher education. In 1992, they acquired university status in a unified sector of higher education. With some exceptions, the higher education that remained with further education colleges was mainly part-time, mostly at levels below the bachelor degree, and served local populations and specific or specialist labour markets.

Although separated by thirty years, a comparison of the pre-binary and post-binary policy episodes is instructive. On the one hand, contrasting processes and assumptions are illustrated about what varieties of institution should be involved in what sorts of higher education, in what combinations and relationships with other provision, and in what circumstances further education colleges might advance their status. On the other, both are a reminder of how long-standing, normal, and necessary has been the role of assorted further education establishments in higher education and training.

In this short exercise in policy history, the modern term 'college higher education' is used to describe the higher education taught in further education establishments since the 1940s. Up to the 1980s, this level of provision was styled 'advanced further education'. Outside of Scotland, courses of non-advanced further education were those up to the A-level qualification or its equivalent. Both advanced and non-advanced further education were the responsibility of local government. In a national system locally administered, further education establishments were owned and controlled by the local authorities, were financed partly from local rates and partly from national taxation, and were subject to general guidance from central government.

When the Education Act of 1944 made it the duty of local authorities to secure adequate facilities for further education, this part of the landscape was better known as technical education. Indeed, it was not until the end of the first policy period that the term 'higher education' acquired a wider currency and that, following the Robbins Report of 1963, university and non-university higher education were regarded as parts of a common system. Since the 1990s, the public funding of higher education, including most of its teaching, was the responsibility of one central funding council. Less noticed or reported, and a matter of some confusion, the funding bodies for further education had the discretion to support certain 'higher-level' qualifications. This they did in some further education colleges. Both sets of provision are described here as 'college higher education'.

Diversity into hierarchy 1944–66

Out of the 'patchwork-quilt' of further education establishments that developed in the decade after the end of the Second World War there had gradually emerged a 'distinct pattern', one that had become 'progressively more logical' (Cantor and Roberts, 1972: 1). This centred on three main types: regional colleges; area colleges; and local colleges. In 1956, a fourth category – colleges of advanced technology – was added in order to recognize establishments with a national role in further education. The basis for this four-fold classification was the scale and level of advanced further education taught by individual colleges and, crucially, the mode of study. Equipped with this framework, and working through regional advisory councils and local authorities, the education ministry was in a position to guide, steer, and coordinate the rapid expansion of student numbers in further education planned for the years ahead.

Two rivers of tertiary education

Many of the elements in this framework for institutional differentiation and for regional–national planning arose not from the 1944 Education Act but out of proposals made by a special committee appointed in the same year, before the legislation itself was published. Chaired by Lord Eustace Percy, the committee was asked to advise on the needs of 'higher technological education' in England and Wales, especially the respective contributions of the universities and the technical colleges. Unlike the 1944 Act, which made no reference to higher education as such, the Percy report and the debates, arrangements, and developments it put in train were to be an important influence on the institutional geography of advanced further education.

The experience of war had exposed serious deficiencies in the quantity and quality of education in general, and technical education in particular. This and a failure to secure the application of science to industry were widely seen as threats to the future of the country as a leading industrial nation. For Percy and his committee, the greatest deficiency was the shortage of scientists and technologists 'who can also administer and organize, and can apply the results of research to development' (Ministry of Education, 1945: 5). While industry looked mainly to the universities for the training of scientists and largely to the technical colleges for the supply of technicians, responsibility for educating senior administrators and technically qualified managers of industry was, for the committee, a shared one.

The obstacles to joint responsibility and effective planning were nevertheless formidable. Not only were the autonomous universities and the local authority colleges – 'the two rivers of tertiary education' (Peters, 1967: 117) – different in their governance, funding, and standing, they were markedly different in the scale, range, and reach of their education. Each tended to act independently, each had its own contacts with industry, and, on their own, neither was regarded as sufficient:

> Hitherto the development of technical education has not been systematically planned. It has been left to local initiative, often without regard to the provision made either by universities or by neighbouring authorities. Indeed, it was abundantly clear even before the war that the whole system requires overhauling if it is to play its part in assisting British industry to hold its own in foreign markets.
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> (Ministry of Education, 1945: 2)

Along with no overarching machinery for consultation and coordination went little or no data collection in common. Only for the universities – by way of returns to the University Grants Committee – was there a full record of courses and students. No data were available on advanced courses in further education before 1954/5, since routine statistics did not distinguish

between advanced and non-advanced students. Even so, it was not until 1958/9 that a full picture of advanced further education was possible following the inclusion of evening-only students. In that year, there were 90,000 students on advanced courses in England and Wales compared to around 83,000 students in the universities (Committee on Higher Education, 1963b).

Back in 1945, probably no more than 50,000 students were studying at the eleven full universities and the affiliated university colleges in England (Tight, 2009). Nearly all were full-time students, most registered for three-year bachelor courses leading to honours degrees. A minority were pursuing ordinary or pass degrees, from the outset or as a result of later transfer. The remainder were postgraduate students, with many more studying for research degrees than for taught degrees. Science-based subjects, including medicine and technology, were dominant, followed by the humanities and social studies.

By contrast, a large majority of those undertaking advanced further education courses studied part-time, during the day or in the evening. While a small number were on courses leading to internal or external university degrees, the rest were enrolled for qualifications at levels below or approximating to the bachelor degree. Students on advanced courses would have been a small fraction of the 768,000 students taught across some 680 major establishments around this time. Of these, only 45,000 were full-time students. Outside the major establishments were 827 evening institutes where another 827,000 students were engaged in short part-time courses. Although mainly concerned with 'recreational' courses, in certain areas the institutes also provided 'fairly advanced vocational courses' (Cantor and Roberts, 1972: 4).

Most college higher education students were likely to be studying for qualifications such as the Higher National Certificate (HNC) or for examinations of the professional institutions. In this era, the HNC was considered a qualification of 'approximately university pass degree standard' but, being based on a part-time course, it necessarily covered 'a narrower field' (Ministry of Education, 1945: 8). Only a few students took the full-time Higher National Diploma (HND). These two qualifications were operated under national certificate schemes administered by joint committees of the education ministry and the professional institutions. Syllabuses were submitted to the joint committees for approval. The examinations were set and marked by college teachers or, as common in smaller colleges, by a 'regional examining union'. Acting under the control of the joint committee, an external examiner appointed by the professional institution assessed the work of the students.

Underneath the HNC and HND were the Ordinary National Certificate (ONC) at a standard 'about that' of the A level and the Ordinary National Diploma (OND) whose level was 'a little higher' (Peters, 1967: 99). Until 1963, the ONC was based on three years of part-time study, followed by a further two years for the HNC, with additional subjects or 'endorsements' at the end of another year. Alternatively, the HNC might be organized on a three-year basis to include the endorsements required for exemption from the examination of professional institutions. The OND was awarded after two years of full-time study and the HND after three or four years, 'depending on the starting standard' (Venables, 1955: 124).

Bearing a variety of titles, the major further education establishments and evening institutes were dispersed across some 146 local authorities. Under the 1944 Act, each local authority was obliged to submit schemes of further education to the ministry. By the end of 1949, 119 had done so but provision for advanced work had 'a very small place' in these schemes such that, up to this point, 'the great development of the technical colleges was entirely unforeseen' (Burgess and Pratt, 1970: 17).

The technical colleges were predominantly for students in apprenticeships or other forms of employment. In contrast to the universities and the colleges of education, courses were at all levels of difficulty, with flexibility as well as variety in the length of programmes, entry

qualifications, study methods, and timetables (Venables, 1955). That the majority studied part-time and a large number attended in the evenings was a worry not just to the Percy committee but was much criticized in subsequent reports for provision at all levels of qualification (Ministry of Education, 1959). The high rates of non-completion and 'retardation' (completion over a longer period than specified) in the HNC and ONC were attributed to the shortage of time and a weakness in the basic subjects, particularly mathematics. Concerns for quality, efficiency, and growth were major reasons for an abiding focus of government policy on full-time forms of advanced further education and, for the ministry, its wish to be involved in decisions about which colleges were approved to provide these programmes.

In the Percy report, part-time study was considered 'wholly inappropriate' to meet the exacting standards required of the modern 'professional engineer' and 'for men fitted for executive responsibility' (Ministry of Education, 1945: 9). A course of higher technological education needed continuous full-time study over substantial periods combined with a 'sandwich' element devoted to training and experience in the workplace. It should 'correspond with' the university-type of degree. There was agreement that the award should be conferred by a 'National Council of Technology' but no agreement about whether it should be titled a degree.

Institutions entrusted with the design and teaching of these new courses should be afforded the greatest possible degree of self-government, while continuing to be subject to the ultimate control of the providing local authority. Accordingly, the committee recommended the selection of a 'strictly limited number' of technical colleges ('colleges of technology') in which these special technological courses would be developed and their comparability with university degree programmes would be assured. Responsibility for the coordination of technological studies, within further education and between the colleges and universities, and in collaboration with industry, would rest with regional advisory councils to be established throughout England and Wales. This regional machinery would have its national counterpart in a central body responsible for advising the ministry and the University Grants Committee.

Taken together, here was a set of recommendations to fashion a new technological qualification in the further education system, to reserve it for 'responsible academic institutions, performing a national function' and to elevate these establishments without relegating other colleges 'to an inferior status' (Ministry of Education, 1945: 13). Each was a source of immediate and subsequent controversy. The Percy report raised fundamental issues about the development of higher education, including the right of non-universities to award degrees. These matters 'were not resolved in a formal sense until the abolition of the binary line in 1992' and the actual implementation of the report 'dragged on for more than a decade' (Shattock, 2012: 19).

A four-tier hierarchy of major establishments of further education

Eleven years after publication of the Percy report there followed a landmark White Paper on technical education that sought formal differentiation within the further education system in order to achieve the rapid expansion outlined in a five-year development plan for the technical colleges (Ministry of Education, 1956b). The objectives over this period were to increase by about one-half the output of students from advanced courses and, as part of a proportionate increase at the lower levels, to double the numbers released by employers for part-time courses during the day. Similar to the proposal in the 1945 report, the White Paper announced the selection of 22 colleges in England and 2 in Wales to take the bulk of future growth in full-time advanced further education.

Accompanying this plan was a four-level classification of major establishments and a description and rationale for the positioning of colleges in each tier. Accessibility, capacity, quality,

and efficiency were the underpinning principles for a framework that needed to be 'flexible', that took account of 'limiting factors' (such as the supply of teachers with the highest qualifications), and that offered courses 'within reasonable reach of the students and industries concerned'. In the distribution of advanced work, the key distinction was between full-time and part-time provision. The standard and scope of full-time advanced and sandwich courses meant they were likely to be conducted at 'only a moderate number of colleges' and 'selected with the distribution of both industry and population in mind'. At the same time, it would also be necessary to strengthen and expand existing provision for part-time advanced further education, so that students were able to find a college 'within a reasonable travelling distance of their work and home' (Ministry of Education, 1956a: 2).

Essential to the success of this policy was regional coordination. As recommended by the Percy committee, nine regional advisory committees had been set up in 1947 to cover the whole of England. These bodies served two main purposes: to bring education and industry together to advise on the pattern and placing of courses; and to secure 'reasonable economy of provision' (Ministry of Education, 1956b: 11). Associated with the councils and responsible for ensuring close cooperation between the universities and colleges, were regional academic boards on which industry and the local authorities were represented, along with universities and technical colleges. At the centre, a National Advisory Council on Education for Industry and Commerce – another Percy recommendation – advised the minister on national policy. While much had been done by these bodies, they were to play an even greater part in the future. Along the way, all colleges engaged in advanced work were expected to develop close contacts with the appropriate universities.

Local colleges

At the base of the hierarchy were local colleges that provided only non-advanced courses or the minimum of advanced work. Their provision was mainly part-time and, on the vocational side, up to the level of the ONC or its equivalent. It was anticipated that many new colleges of this kind would be required to meet the planned growth in part-time day courses and to greatly increase the supply of technicians and workers with craft and commercial skills.

As with other categories, the definition of local colleges neither prescribed their number nor precluded their elevation 'when the circumstances justify it' (Ministry of Education, 1956a: 1) into the next tier of area colleges. There might be cases in which major housing or industrial developments or substantial growth in local demand justified the evolution of a local college into an area college, or, for that matter, the establishment of a new area college.

Area colleges

In addition to the types of course provided at local colleges, varying amounts of advanced work were offered, mainly part-time, by area colleges. For these establishments, the aim was to enhance and expand their provision of the HNC and similar part-time courses. About 175 technical colleges ran HNC courses, yet the numbers gaining this qualification did not exceed 7,000 annually. Since this number included colleges positioned on the next rungs of the ladder (the regional colleges and colleges of advanced technology), the volume of students taking such courses at some of the colleges was 'very modest'.

A number of the existing area colleges offered a few advanced full-time or sandwich courses. These arrangements would not be disturbed 'so long as the courses remain efficient and economical' (Ministry of Education, 1956a: 2). However, the bulk of the courses of these

kinds would be provided in future at regional colleges and colleges of advanced technology. Only exceptionally would new full-time advanced programmes be approved at area colleges. In considering applications of this kind, particular attention would be paid to the quality of the staff, the teaching record of the college, and the prospect of continued annual recruitment of a minimum of 15 suitable students.

Regional colleges

Regional colleges were those with a substantial amount of advanced provision, including in particular full-time and sandwich courses, but in which 'the volume and character of advanced work (including part-time work) are not such as to make it realistic for the college to concentrate entirely on such work' (Ministry of Education, 1956a: 2). A number of these colleges provided advanced courses 'of distinction' in single technologies.

In 1952 a special 75 per cent grant (instead of the 60 per cent main education grant) was introduced to foster the development of technical colleges in which a large proportion of the provision would consist of advanced technological courses and research. By the end of 1955, 24 regional colleges were in receipt of this grant, with the HND 'frequently the qualification aimed for' (Argles, 1964: 90). It was from this group that the ministry hoped that 'as many of them as possible' might develop speedily into colleges of advanced technology. In addition, 'a few other' colleges might qualify for this grant 'because of developments now in train or the movement of industry' (Ministry of Education, 1956b: 17).

For those among the 24 that were unable, in the short term, to divest themselves of lower-level work or to satisfy all the conditions set out for their designation as colleges of technology, the colleges so placed would rank as regional colleges. They were encouraged by the government to seek every opportunity to strengthen and expand their courses, including those leading to the Diploma in Technology, a national award of honours-degree standard. First made in 1958, this award was originally suggested by the Percy report and subsequently implemented by the National Council for Technological Awards set up in 1955.

Colleges of advanced technology

At the apex of the system would be the colleges of advanced technology, whose conditions of recognition included a broad range and substantial volume of technological and allied work exclusively at the advanced levels (including research and postgraduate education); an independent governing body; a staff with appropriate qualifications and experience; and teaching conditions that approximated to those for work of equivalent standard at the universities. All their expenditure on advanced technological courses would qualify for a 75 per cent grant and the governing body would have the freedom to spend from within the annual budget approved by the authorities maintaining or aiding these establishments.

Five years on, this fourfold classification was judged to have 'facilitated the rapid and orderly expansion of further education' (Ministry of Education, 1961: 1), particularly at the higher levels. As intended, the first institutions designated as colleges of advanced technology had developed 'as centres for work exclusively at university level'. In 1962 they ceased to be maintained by local authorities and were financed by grants direct from the education ministry. Between these institutions and the local colleges were nearly 200 further education establishments engaged, in some measure, in advanced work. These colleges varied widely, from institutions whose most advanced provision consisted of one or two HNC courses to others that provided diploma, external degree, and even postgraduate courses.

Endorsement, displacement, and disuse

As a policy instrument, the framework of classification received a strong endorsement from the Robbins inquiry into British higher education. Given the unease with part-time provision, the remit of the inquiry was limited to full-time higher education. Despite this, the inquiry took a broad interpretation of its terms of reference. From the beginning, part-time advanced education was included in the collection and examination of evidence and, most importantly, in its assumptions about the locations and levels of future growth. Adopted to help achieve 'a rational distribution of resources', the committee emphasized the possibility of movement between the four categories of colleges:

> the system was left flexible with opportunities for a college to move from one category to another. All are expanding and even within each category there is a great deal of variety, because the colleges have differing traditions, serve different needs and are at different stages of evolution.
>
> (Committee on Higher Education, 1963a: 30)

Below the 10 colleges of advanced technology designated since 1956 were, at the time of the inquiry, 25 regional colleges, 8 of them in Greater London. As before, the regional colleges were envisaged as centres in which the main development of new advanced full-time and sandwich courses might be expected. They had nearly the same number of advanced full-time students as the colleges of technology, but over twice as many part-time students enrolled at the higher levels. They taught about half the number of full-time degree students in further education.

Another 165 area colleges accounted for nearly one-quarter of all advanced full-time students and provided more than half of all part-time advanced students. Although the proportions varied greatly, 15 per cent of the full-time work in area colleges was advanced and about ten per cent of the part-time provision. These colleges were the major providers of the HND and the HNC. Most of the local colleges offered only non-advanced courses but, as the Robbins report noted, some might move into the category of area colleges, 'as advanced courses are approved from time to time in response to local initiatives' (Committee on Higher Education, 1963a: 31).

By recommending that the ten colleges of advanced technology should become 'technological universities', the report appeared to remove one of the institutional tiers from the further education system, or at least leave it vacant for possible future use. Indeed, in arguing for a university-led pattern of future growth in full-time higher education, the report opened the path for some existing regional colleges to attain university status. The rate at which this should happen would be judged primarily on the record of achievement of individual institutions. From the regional colleges and the teacher training establishments in England and from the central institutions in Scotland, it was 'a reasonable hope' that some ten colleges would have reached university status by the beginning of the 1980s.

Over this same period, the task of providing for the expansion of advanced part-time education would fall on those regional colleges not singled out for university status and on the area colleges. Among the latter, advanced full-time courses would, in the main, be concentrated in those likely to be selected for regional college status. Although beyond its terms of reference, the Robbins report was alert to the impact of its recommendations on non-advanced further education:

> … in the process of encouraging the growth of full-time work at advanced level, the organic connections between the different stages of technical education must not be harmed.
>
> (Committee on Higher Education, 1963a: 138)

Moreover, if the colleges as a whole ceased to be administered by local government:

> There is some risk that the links with school education – which are essential if technical education is to provide an alternative ladder of higher education for boys and girls who are unable to follow, or are unsuited to, a sixth form and university course – will also be weakened.
>
> (Committee on Higher Education, 1963a: 139)

In all this, the regional advisory councils would once again have an increasingly responsible part to play, especially to avoid 'false hopes' emerging as to the elevation of colleges to the next tier.

The ministry model for classifying further education establishments and for enabling a select few to 'advance their status' was well-suited to a system of higher education, as recommended by Robbins, in which expansion was 'essentially university based, with a ladder offering promotion to university status to non-university institutions' (Shattock, 2014: 118). However, the ladder principle was soon to be rejected by the incoming Labour Government in favour of a binary policy to counterbalance the university sector and to concentrate full-time courses of local authority higher education in a new set of institutions called 'polytechnics'. Unlike the Conservative administration that had set up the inquiry, the successor Labour Government was not necessarily committed to the Robbins report. In 1965, it announced the creation of 30 polytechnics as an alternative to a unitary university-dominated structure of higher education.

Created mostly by mergers among the regional and other colleges 'which had already established a reputation as centres of higher education', the aim was to 'settle the list' of polytechnics for about ten years and 'not add to it' within this period (Department of Education and Science, 1966: 6). In this way, the remaining colleges and their local authorities would 'know where they stand' and would be able to concentrate on their responsibilities for 'other' categories of students:

> Thus the system will come to resemble a fork rather than a ladder. A dual system will be perpetuated deliberately.
>
> (Peters, 1967: 127)

With an end to the ladder principle, a fixing of the number of polytechnics, and a binary policy supported by all governments over the next 25 years, the tier system as a basis for planning fell into disuse.

Legacy and complexity 1997–2010

The binary divide in English higher education was finally abandoned in 1992. After two decades of development, the 29 polytechnics had acquired strong national roles, their courses included all the major subjects except medicine and they catered for a larger number of students than the universities. Removed from local government and then rewarded with degree-awarding powers and university titles, the former polytechnics joined the existing universities and other major establishments in a unified sector of higher education. In future, most of the growth in higher education was planned to come from the institutions in this sector.

Relieved of responsibility for higher education and also removed from local authority control, the same legislation in 1992 placed the colleges in a new sector of further education. These institutions would be devoted to non-advanced further education. To administer the division of institutional labour between further and higher education were separate and parallel funding councils, quality assessment regimes, and data collection agencies. For the architects of the reform, any higher education remaining with the colleges was regarded as singular, particular, or marginal; and likely to reduce in size and as a proportion over time.

Within five years, these policy presumptions were overturned. From 1997, further education colleges were not just brought back into higher education but they were assigned an important role in renewing growth, widening participation, diversifying provision, and enhancing progression. Between 1997 and 2010, under consecutive Labour governments, specific efforts were made to re-establish a mission for further education colleges in short-cycle vocational higher education. Now viewed as overlapping and intersecting sectors, both the forms taken by college higher education and the relationships entered into by further education colleges with higher education institutions were to assume a new intensity and complexity.

In this second policy episode, combinations of government-led and market-based approaches were used, with limited success, to shape and build the college share of higher education. The same ambition for college higher education has been pursued by subsequent administrations, now framed by austerity policies and associated reforms aimed at the removal of barriers to competition between university, college, and private providers (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011). These were far from the planned arrangements and the ordered hierarchies sought for advanced further education in the years between Percy and Robbins.

Two sectors of tertiary education

With the 1992 Act came a sector of higher education institutions teaching undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, undertaking basic and applied research, and enrolling over one million students, most of them studying full-time. On the other side of the tertiary system was a sector of teaching-only further education colleges, now formally independent but without the power to award their own qualifications and subject to direction from central government. Its courses were generally non-selective and the majority of its more than three million college students were adults engaged in part-time study. A high proportion of the student population were 'returners' to education (Melville and Macleod, 2000).

The detachment of the polytechnics and other higher education establishments from local government following the 1988 Education Reform Act meant their departure from the world of further education. These institutions were established in their own higher education sector, alongside a reformed sector for the universities. Those colleges not meeting the criteria for designation as institutions predominantly concerned with higher education remained with the local authorities in a smaller sector of further education. The establishments left in the local authority further education sector after 1988 formed the main group joining the sector of self-managing further education colleges after 1992. Other entrants to the new further education sector were sixth form colleges (previously under schools regulations) and a range of 'external' institutions that, although maintained by local authorities, were eligible to receive support from the further education funding council.

While the case for sequestering the polytechnics from further education and later for promoting them to university status was made in the White Papers preceding the 1988 and 1992 Acts (Department of Education and Science, 1987; 1991b), no such rationale or accompanying principles and arguments guided the re-formation of the further education sector at these points. That the changed composition and governance of the sector in 1992 failed to produce a statement of shared mission and purpose (Department of Education and Science, 1991a) lent support to the suspicion that 'it had been to some extent thrown together' (Smithers and Robinson, 2000: 1).

The role defined for local colleges in the 1950s and 1960s, as providers solely or primarily concerned with non-advanced further education, was similar to that assumed for all further education colleges after 1988 and 1992. Colleges in membership of the post-1992 further

education sector were classified into institutional types but these were descriptive, not functional or developmental, categories. Nor did these types take account of the higher education and higher-level qualifications that might continue to be provided by further education institutions.

By far the largest group were the 'general' further education colleges. As a response to economic recession in the 1970s and a subsequent decline in manufacturing that severely reduced the intake of apprentices and technicians, many technical colleges diversified their provision and turned themselves into general colleges. Typically, they came to offer a wide range of vocational, academic, liberal, and basic education courses to young people and adults. In later years, they began to compete more openly with schools in local markets for upper secondary education, especially A-level qualifications.

Close to three hundred general further education colleges joined the new sector in 1992. Around sixty of these were termed 'tertiary colleges' since, in addition to catering for adults, they were the sole or main providers of education for 16- to 18-year-olds in their area. The second largest group comprised more than one hundred sixth form colleges whose provision was mostly geared to A-level provision for 16- to 18-year-olds. Another sixty or so were 'specialist' colleges in land-based subjects or art and design, or 'specialist designated' colleges concerned with the education of adults.

The post-binary residuum

Notwithstanding the formation of a three-sector structure in 1988 and a two-sector system in 1992, there was an amount of higher education that stayed with colleges in the further education sector. During the passage of these reforms, there was less interest among the central authorities in the character and health of this residual segment. In one of the few documents to break this silence, a survey report by Her Majesty's Inspectorate described this higher education as 'substantial and diverse'. Included in this provision were courses meeting a specific (often local) need, courses in unusual subjects, and courses for which there was high demand: a variety and geographical spread that played a significant part in 'widening opportunities for students' (Department of Education and Science, 1989).

These colleges and courses accounted for around 120,000 higher education students in 1989, or 15 per cent of the total of 808,000 higher education students in England. By 1993, at the height of the dramatic growth that began in the late 1980s, this number had increased to 146,000. Due to the faster rate of expansion among the polytechnics and the universities, the proportion of college higher education had reduced to 12 per cent by this date. However, this was to underestimate the number of higher education students actually taught in further education colleges. As a result of the subcontracting (franchising) of teaching to further education colleges by the fastest-expanding polytechnics, an estimated additional 30,000 higher education students were taught by the colleges, giving a total of 176,000 out of nearly 1.2 million students and returning the proportion to 15 per cent (Parry, 2003).

Most of this activity was dispersed among the general further education colleges, usually as small pockets of provision and accounting for just 5 per cent of the total of students in the college sector. Around fifty to sixty colleges, including some of the specialist institutions, had sizeable amounts of higher education. To highlight their distinctive mission, these self-styled 'mixed-economy colleges' came together to lobby on behalf of their interests. From the beginning, this group of colleges was not translated into official categories, although they were to achieve some influence as an interest or pressure group.

Three decades earlier, when the four-tier framework was in full use, there were 138,000 students on advanced courses in further education establishments, most studying part-time and

with equal numbers enrolled as part-time day and part-time evening students. When the Robbins committee counted these enrolments in 1962/3, they represented nearly half (48 per cent) of the total number of students in higher education in England and Wales. Area colleges accounted for the largest number of advanced further education students, followed by the regional colleges and the colleges of advanced technology. In line with the ministry framework, only a handful of advanced students were taught in the local colleges (Parry, 2014).

The Dearing moment

No such categorization was available to central government in 1997 when it accepted the recommendations of the Dearing report on future growth in higher education: that more funded places should be allocated to courses at the sub-bachelor levels; and, equally controversial, that further education colleges should be accorded a 'special mission' in higher education at these levels:

> At least initially, we see a large part of the growth taking place at sub-degree level. This is likely better to reflect the aspirations of many of those who may enter this expanded system, large numbers of whom are likely to have non-standard entry qualifications and more diverse aspirations.
>
> (National Committee of Inquiry, 1997: 100)

And:

> In many cases, local requirements for sub-degree higher education can be met particularly well by further education colleges, whether as direct providers or in a partnership with a higher education institution. … We recommend to the Government and the Funding Bodies that, in the medium term, priority in the growth in sub-degree provision should be accorded to further education colleges.
>
> (National Committee of Inquiry, 1997: 259–60)

The Dearing committee believed there was scope for 'an immediate growth' in programmes such as the HND and HNC. Awarded by the Business and Technology Education Council (and, after 1996, by Edexcel), these were two-year programmes studied full-time and part-time respectively. The committee was equally confident that demand for college higher education 'will increase over the next twenty years' such that most of the teaching of short-cycle qualifications would become a college responsibility.

The evidence base for these assumptions was conspicuously slim (Parry, 1999), unlike the studies underpinning the projections made by the Robbins inquiry. It was also in contrast to the extent of the analytical work put into the Dearing recommendations on future funding. These centred on the introduction of tuition fees charged to full-time undergraduate students. They understandably attracted the most attention when the Dearing report was published, especially when the government immediately accepted the principle but not the model of cost-sharing proposed by the committee.

That priority in growth should be given to sub-bachelor higher education in further education colleges was variously justified in terms of the demands of a lifelong learning society; the importance of local providers and staged qualifications for 'non-traditional' students; and, echoing the reports on technical and technological education in the 1950s and 1960s, the weak performance of the country in education and training at the intermediate levels. A missing argument, at least in the pages of the report, was the lower costs of short-cycle and college-based courses. Moreover, in recommending a flat-rate tuition fee for full-time domestic students, the

committee rejected funding options that might favour sub-bachelor over bachelor programmes or college over university providers.

There were, at the same time, warnings in the report about academic drift in the college mission and the threat to standards posed by multiple franchising. Restricting the college contribution to sub-bachelor qualifications and funding courses directly through the Higher Education Funding Council were measures intended to curb these tendencies:

> 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 more of this 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 …
>
> (National Committee of Inquiry, 1997: 260)

This was the nearest the inquiry came to pressing for institutional stratification in English higher education, with colleges in the further education sector expected to be the primary location for short-cycle vocational higher education. Crucially, responsibility for funding and policy development in respect of college higher education was given, not to a further education body, but to the funding council for higher education. This was consistent with the two-sector architecture created in 1992, if now at odds with the post-Dearing policy that higher education should no longer be reserved for one sector. The need for a machinery of coordination between the two sectors, a matter that preoccupied ministers in the immediate post-war period, was considered unnecessary since colleges were required to compete as well as collaborate with universities in order to build their place in higher education.

Unlike the Percy and Robbins inquiries, each with one or more members able to speak to the interests of further education, the composition of the Dearing committee reflected the prevailing view that, within the English system, the colleges were no longer a significant location for higher education. This proved no bar to the committee making major policy recommendations for the further education sector in England, with implications for the overall mission and capacity of individual colleges (including the coherence of their provision) and for the sector agencies concerned with their performance and direction. There were consequences too for the English Higher Education Funding Council. Its knowledge of the work of colleges was always likely to be uneven and stretched. Inevitably, relationships with institutions in this sector would be of a different order:

> In addition to working with the 132 universities and HE colleges in the HE sector, we also have a direct funding relationship with over 200 further education colleges. The nature of our relationship with FECs is necessarily different from our relationship with HEIs. We do not have the same responsibility for the overall health and development of the institution in the case of FECs. That responsibility rests with the Further Education Funding Council … as the primary funder. Our role is only to fund one or more HE programmes, which will always be a minority of the institution's activity.
>
> (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2001: 23)

There was also a question of proportion:

> We cannot realistically achieve the same depth of relationship with an FE college which may offer only a handful of HE places as with a university offering tens of thousands of places.
>
> (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2001: 23)

The post-Dearing years

In the event, few of the Dearing proposals on the funding and mission of college higher education survived their less than full endorsement by the central authorities (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 1997). On the one side, weak demand expressed for short-cycle courses in the years following publication of the report saw additional funded places unfilled. On the other, the popularity of full-time bachelor degrees in the universities was undimmed, despite the introduction of tuition fees.

To inject additional growth into the system, and as part of larger policies aimed at economic competitiveness and social inclusion, the Labour Government announced an ambitious 50 per cent participation target in higher education to be met by the year 2010. With graduates and those holding sub-degree qualifications earning, on average, around half as much again as non-graduates, the 2003 White Paper saw no reason why a further expansion in participation (then at 43 per cent) and a three-fold increase in the maximum fee level should reduce the economic value of higher education, 'especially if the main part of the increase comes in new and employer-responsive types of degree' (Department for Education and Skills, 2003: 59).

In a second radical move, in 2000 the government had piloted a new short-cycle work-focused qualification: the two-year foundation degree. Where the Diploma in Technology in the 1950s was a national award of honours degree standard unable to be called a degree, the foundation degree was a sub-bachelor qualification that now, for the first time, carried the title of degree. From 2004, institutions were offered additional funded places for foundation degrees in preference to bachelor degrees so that future growth would come predominantly through this new route. In this way, the 'skills gap' would be tackled where it was most acute and, if successful, a means found to 'break the traditional pattern of demand' for undergraduate education (Department for Education and Skills, 2003: 62).

Discrete and embedded policies

In contrast to the measures that grew out of the Percy report, their focus being higher education among the technical colleges, the 50 per cent target and the foundation degree were interventions aimed at both the universities and the colleges. For the rest of the decade, there were to be no higher education policies exclusive to colleges. The one major exception was the legislation in 2007 enabling individual further education colleges to apply for foundation degree-awarding powers, a process within reach of just a few colleges.

Another would have been to use policies on fees to differentiate between types of institutions and courses. Instead, the variable tuition fees outlined in the 2003 White Paper were designed to encourage price competition between universities, and between them and the colleges, with the latter expected to charge a lower level of fee for their own higher education programmes. The outcome was different: nearly all universities charged the maximum allowable fee and most of the colleges were not far behind.

Arguably, the Dearing proposals presupposed policies and approaches specific, or otherwise tailored, to further education sector institutions. This was the strategy adopted in the years immediately following the inquiry report. However, even if demand for short-cycle higher education had been strong and the colleges had been able to take advantage of the directly funded numbers made available to them, the volume of students they received was likely to have been smaller than the numbers won and more easily absorbed by the large multifaculty and multipurpose universities.

Ahead of the White Paper, the government indicated its preference for indirect funding of colleges on the grounds that, contrary to Dearing, franchise or collaborative relationships

with universities would vouchsafe quality and stimulate demand for courses taught in the name of a degree-awarding institution. Although there would be instances where direct funding was appropriate (as with 'niche' provision or where there were no obvious higher education partners), it was through structured funding partnerships between colleges and universities that college higher education would 'deliver the best benefits to learners' and 'meet local and regional skills needs'. As before: 'We want this significant role to continue and grow' (Department for Education and Skills, 2003: 62).

This shift, together with funding approaches designed to foster greater competition between institutions, encouraged several colleges to move into higher education at the bachelor level, frequently by way of a 'top-up' year attached to their existing short-cycle programmes. Such upward drift was what the tiered system in the first policy episode was designed to manage and control, and which the Dearing inquiry had sought to prevent. In the managed markets now operating for funded numbers and for validating services there were opportunities for some colleges to extend the vertical range of their higher education qualifications.

Over the remaining period up to 2010, policies with a bearing on college higher education were frequently embedded in strategies that applied equally to universities. Efforts to promote employer engagement and skills formation were spearheaded by foundation degrees taught in similar numbers in the two sectors. While the colleges contributed to widening participation in important ways – their students were older, more likely to be studying part-time, and more likely to come from areas of low participation – the funding premiums for student access and success were the same for all providers of publicly funded higher education.

From 1994, joint funding was made available to colleges and universities to create 'lifelong learning networks'. These brought colleges and universities into relationship to improve progression opportunities for students with vocational qualifications across a city, area, region, or subject. On each of these fronts, collaboration between colleges and universities was the touchstone, a relationship to be brokered not 'from above' but forged by mutual interest and incentive funding.

Flat numbers and falling shares

For all this policy activity, the higher education numbers taught in the further education sector remained flat. An internal review by the Higher Education Funding Council was perplexed by this lack of progress:

> 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.
> (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2006: 7)

Little reference was made here to the growing divergence between the two sectors in their funding and quality regimes and, within the further education sector, the changing structures and shifting priorities experienced by colleges (Scott, 2009).

In 2001, the Further Education Funding Council was abolished and a new body established – the Learning and Skills Council – with responsibility for the strategic development, planning, management, and quality assurance of the whole of post-16 education and training 'excluding higher education'. Now under one national body were the further education colleges, the publicly funded training organizations, the providers of community and adult learning, and the school sixth forms (Coffield *et al.*, 2008). Coinciding with the policy push for higher education

in the further education sector, another part of government used its announcement of the new council to supply a justification for why higher education and post-16 education should remain separate and divided:

> 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.
>
> (Department for Education and Employment, 1999: 42)

Such a statement had been absent in 1988 and 1992. That it should arrive at the height of efforts to promote a cross-sector pattern of higher education was an indication of how powerful and enduring was the assumptive architecture of the two-sector system.

A review of the future role of colleges in England led by the Learning and Skills Council (Foster, 2005) made only brief reference to their history and involvement in both advanced and non-advanced further education. This was followed by another White Paper urging colleges to focus on their 'core economic mission': namely, equipping young people and adults with 'the skills, competences and qualifications that employers want' (Department for Education and Skills, 2006). Henceforth, every general further education college was expected to develop one or more areas of specialist vocational excellence and make these central to their ethos and purpose.

Except for aligning this mission with the 'strong occupational and employment purpose' of college higher education, the White Paper left it to the bodies responsible for higher education to account for this element of the college contribution. Rarely mentioned was the power given to the further education funding bodies to fund 'non-prescribed' higher education. This referred to the higher-level programmes of vocational, technical, and professional education omitted from the schedule of 'prescribed' courses eligible for support by the Higher Education Funding Council. Included on the non-prescribed list were a wide range of awards validated by professional bodies and, up to 1999, the HNC. Although never a funding priority, even when 'higher skills' moved up the policy agenda, there were an estimated 30,000 students on non-prescribed courses supported by the Learning and Skills Council at the time (2008) that this organization, like its predecessor, was abolished. This represented close to 20 per cent of the total population of higher education students taught in the post-16 sector (Parry *et al.,* 2012).

Non-prescribed courses, prescribed programmes, franchise partnerships, validation agreements, and qualifications at the bachelor and sub-bachelor levels were features of the complexity of college higher education: a heterogeneity greater than that found in the higher education sector. By 2010, there had still been no overall growth in college-taught higher education. Around one in twelve higher education students (177,000 or 8 per cent of the total) were studying in 280 or so further education colleges in England. The majority were pursuing prescribed courses, most leading to foundation degrees and with roughly equal numbers undertaking higher national qualifications (HND and HNC) and bachelor degrees. Indirect funding partnerships were especially prominent, although often in combination with other funding routes:

> The high-level distinctions between prescribed and non-prescribed provision, between franchised students and validated programmes or between 'vocational' and 'academic' subjects only scratch the surface; the heterogeneity runs much deeper. On almost every scale – number of HE

students, balance of HE and FE provision in individual colleges, number of external validators and accreditors, depth of employer links – there are significant differences.

(Parry *et al.,* 2012: 175)

As a consequence of the global banking crisis in 2008, the final years in this policy period saw reductions in public funding for higher and further education. In one of its last statements before leaving office in 2010, the Labour Government exhorted colleges and universities to develop new types of higher education programmes that 'widen opportunities for flexible study' and 'reflect the reality of modern working lives', such as through higher-level apprenticeships and 'innovative partnerships'. After twelve years of policy endeavour, it was still felt necessary to offer the reminder that 'not all higher education is delivered in universities', and to make clear the preference of a third-term Labour government for market-type competition, not intervention and direction by the state and its agencies:

There is a long tradition of delivery of higher education by further education colleges. This will continue, especially in areas dominated by vocational and strategic skills. Further education colleges are not universities and should not aim to be. But they are a valuable part of the higher education landscape. We have no view on what proportion of higher education learners should be taught in further education colleges. That should be the outcome of learner and employer choices, not an administrative target.

(Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2009: 104)

Postscript

In juxtaposing two policy episodes, thirty years apart, one intention has been to point to differences and similarities in the efforts of governments to expand higher education in further education establishments. Another has been to bring into view those further education colleges whose primary purpose is not higher education but that nevertheless perform the twin functions of qualifying students for entry into undergraduate education, wherever that might be, and providing their own courses of higher education. As the distributed parts of English higher education during its 'elite' and 'mass' phases, they highlight the difficulties encountered by the central authorities in simultaneously trying to make sense of this provision and seeking to make policy for its overall development.

Clearly, the contrasts are striking. In the one, a classificatory hierarchy was deployed to steer the development and distribution of higher education across the entire further education system. This involved judgements about which institutions might transfer to an autonomous sector of universities; about the balance to be struck between advanced and non-advanced work; and about which establishments should devote themselves to non-advanced further education. In the other, a separate sector was created for colleges whose core mission was always other than higher education; whose pockets of undergraduate and higher-level education would meet local-regional needs for skills, training, and employment; and whose acquisition of full degree-awarding powers or transfer to the higher education sector was not generally entertained.

There are commonalities as well, notably the extent to which the divisions or boundaries of further education were shaped more by the demands of higher education and rather less by arguments for the primacy, integrity, and coherence of education at the other levels. In the first policy episode, the driver for the four tiers of further education was the size and share of advanced further education, especially the patterns and modes of study. Alternative schemes for the differentiation of colleges were unlikely to have come from elsewhere, given that the education and training of the rest of the workforce depended on the willingness of individual employers to release their employees and apprentices, with the state reluctant to disturb a

tradition of voluntarism in relations between industry and government. In the second episode, when ministers were actively involved in reforming tertiary structures, the redefinition of the further education sector was keyed to the removal of higher education, and then seriously troubled by the decision to reverse this policy but leave further and higher education under different and diverging regimes for each sector.

The other reason for revisiting these episodes is to take a long view of events and developments that slip too easily out of the policy memory. It is to remind the education and policy communities in England of the normality of colleges with comprehensive or mixed-sector missions spanning further and higher education; and to recognize that, for a good many further education colleges, their involvement in higher-level work was long-standing. Given the pace and intensity of present-day policy processes, there is a need as well to acquaint governments with the short history of contemporary sequences, if only to avoid the regular rediscovery of college higher education in official narratives, as highlighted here for the post-Dearing years.

Notes on the contributor

Gareth Parry is Professor and Director of the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Sheffield. He is also a Programme and Project Leader in the ESRC/HEFCE Centre for Global Higher Education based at the UCL Institute of Education, University College London.

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