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**Research domain: Academic Practice, Work and Cultures**

**Title: Dual identities: Does working in a dual-sector institution create tensions for academic and institutional identity? (0078)**

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### **Part 1: Abstract**

This paper considers the role of dual-sector institutions in a diverse higher education sector, resulting in the shift from elite to mass participation, especially the impact of the tensions inherent within a dual system upon academic and institutional identities. The findings of interviews with academic staff, originally conducted as part of a HEFCE funded Leadership, Governance and Management project<sup>1</sup>, are re-considered in respect of the tensions caused by working at the interface of further/higher education. The institution used as a research site, is a post - 1992 university, which merged with a further education college in 2004, to form a dual-sector institution espousing an equal commitment to both further and higher education.

### **Part 2: Outline**

#### **Introduction**

The higher education sector in the UK is currently diverse and differentiated, having expanded from an elite, to a mass, system, with a policy aspiration to further expand to achieve a participation rate of 50% of eighteen to thirty year olds by 2010. This transition has not been accompanied by the changes to structural and institutional systems usually cited as preconditions for achieving growth, and resulted from public behaviour, rather than policy directives (Parry 2003). Consequently, perceptions of a university retained an outdated concept, perhaps different from the current reality of a higher education institution. Newman's *Idea of a University* (1854) would appear to be enduring?

#### **The policy context: widening participation and improving access**

The drive to widen participation and improve access to higher education is underpinned by an agenda to improve competition in a global economic market and to pursue social justice (DfES, 2002). The resultant expansion of higher education has seen the growth of collaborative partnerships between further and higher education institutions. There were 108,000 students studying higher education in

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<sup>1</sup> Managing Change and Collaboration in Dual Sector (FE-HE) institutions, HEFCE Leadership and Governance Fund (2007), LGMF-049

further education in 2006/7 (HEFCE, 2009) and within the current higher education sector in England, institutions combining higher and further education constitute a significant proportion of the provision and offer a distinctive experience to students. Such institutions can be categorised as dual-sector, a term used by Garrod and Macfarlane (2006).

HEFCE (2006/48) recognised that this type of provision performed two important functions, providing a major source of recruits to undergraduate education and providing a local setting for the delivery of higher education. However, the possible tensions inherent within dual-sector institutions have an impact upon the academic and institutional identities.

### **The inherent tensions of dualism**

The differing systems of further and higher education, co-existing within a dual-sector institution, influence organisational cultures. Barnett (2000) poses the view that the sheer complexity of national systems of higher education militate against a unifying story in the diversity resulting from mass higher education, and that this can undermine the appropriateness of the terminology in relation to its etymological roots (the universal). Barnett (2003) goes on to pose the question – ‘Is the university possible?’ when faced with an epistemological undermining concerning the concepts of knowledge, truth and reason, key to the idea of the liberal university, together with the sociological undermining caused by the reduction in autonomy, as it becomes interconnected with national and global society. Preston (2001) discusses the university of managerialism, defined as the strategic approach to achieve goals through processes, manifesting itself in the language of quality and audit. This type of language is reflected in the comments of academic staff interviewed.

Traditionally, higher education is associated with the idea of a university, and further education with vocational training. In England, both have medieval origins, when Oxford and Cambridge were established to educate the ancient professions and the guilds were established to regulate the training and practice of crafts. Silver (2007) writes about tradition and higher education, describing the ways in which universities have had to adapt and transform themselves, in order to survive and respond to changing circumstances. In doing so, the newer universities have adopted the symbols, structures, vocabularies and missions of the ‘traditional’ universities, supporting Rothblatt’s (1997) assertion that it is the essence of the institution that is the significant factor in the perception of itself. This theme of self-perception, in presenting an analysis of the views of academic staff in a dual-sector institution, is explored in the following table.

**Cultural differences between higher and further education: how do academics see themselves?**

<b>Higher Education</b>	<b>Further education</b>
Collegiate ethos	Managerial ethos
Flat management structure	Hierarchical management structure
Proactive approach to the external environment	Reactive approach to the external environment
Tendency towards a liberal curriculum	Tendency towards an instrumental curriculum
Empowering approach to students' learning	Prescriptive approach to students' learning

A range of factors were cited by interviewees to explain these differences. Some were uncomfortable with combining further and higher education, because a university has different educational aims to that of a further education college:

*'in the normally accepted sense of the word, a university is a post 18 institution, which has a focus on scholarship, and that manifests itself in a variety of ways ..... an FE institution, by its very nature, is about skills'.*

It was also felt that the mixed composition of the student body undermined the legitimacy of the institution as a university.

*'The threats are that your university may not be a university for very long? ..... It's an issue where if you have more FE students than HE students, then you run the risk of the university not being a university.... '*

The more regulated environment of further education has led to a management style that contrasts with that in higher education:

*'People in FE are more structured, organised, better time managers but less entrepreneurial, less creative, less able to deal with uncertainty. FE is a much more regulated environment, there is the Ofsted inspection regime.....you are much more closely monitored ....it's about targets, attainments, goals, those sorts of things whereas HE is a more relaxed environment and the presence of a research culture makes it different as well'.*

## **The impact of dualism upon academic and institutional identity**

Is this dualism a product of different organisational cultures, or is it a manifestation of different perceptions of identity? The perceptions of interviewees reflect an adherence to the traditional tenets of a university and the associated values of research, liberalism and collegiality, which are not necessarily present in the newer universities, but which conform to Silver's assertion that they adopt the symbols and vocabularies of the traditional universities. Universities have always reflected and responded to changing social and political needs, in terms of their purpose, curriculum and pedagogy, hence the public perception of the idea of a university, and its golden age, is possibly mythical. Dual-sector institutions are one aspect of a continuum of change in the massification of higher education. This is a symptom of what Barnett (2000) refers to as a 'supercomplex world', in which a surfeit of data must be handled, not only within a complex, but given, frame of reference, but in terms of multiple frames of understanding and self-identity.

The instrumentalist approach to vocational education in the further education sector has permeated the boundary with higher education, to some extent, although the diversity of the university sector has retained elements of the concept and values of the Western liberal university. Watson (2008) in a briefing paper for the QAA states that universities are private corporations, with important public contracts and several potential candidates for ownership. In this evolutionary process, with the possibility of a differentiated fee structure imminent, academic identities within a diverse higher education may have to grapple with the dilemmas of a multiplicity of objectives.

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