

Whether vocational training and further education are located inside or outside the higher education system, the move from mass to near-universal participation has seen wider sets of relationships between colleges and universities together with overlap in their missions and activities (Moodie 2008). In the case of England, where institutions of higher education and establishments of further education occupy separate sectors, colleges predominantly concerned with further education have been able to offer courses leading to higher education qualifications.

Following legislation in 1988 and 1992, it was intended that the bulk of future growth in undergraduate education would be concentrated in the higher education institutions (Parry 2003). Although a two-sector architecture was created to secure this division of labour, such was the pace and scale of expansion during these years that colleges took a share of these numbers. Some of these numbers were sub-contracted to colleges by many of the fastest-expanding polytechnics under franchise arrangements. This pattern of development was neither planned nor regulated. When a crisis funding brought expansion to a close after 1994, it was left to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to make sense of this provision (HEFCE 1995).

In what amounted to a reversal of previous policy, a newly elected Labour government accepted the recommendations of the Dearing inquiry (1996-97) for renewed growth funded in part by tuition fees payable by students. Less anticipated was the Dearing proposal that colleges should play a larger part in meeting future demand, much of which was expected to be expressed at the sub-bachelor levels. For Dearing, this 'special mission' for colleges was to be directly funded by HEFCE, with curbs on both franchising (seen as a threat to standards) and bachelor-level teaching (so as to avoid academic drift).

None of these conditions survived into the second Blair administration. Franchising was eventually preferred to direct funding and colleges were able to expand into bachelor degrees. Most important of all, no priority was accorded to further education establishments in the allocation of additional funded places. Nevertheless, an expanded role for colleges in higher education remained a policy commitment throughout the Labour years, especially to help achieve its 50% target. Rather than a special, discrete or exclusive mission in short-cycle vocational higher education, colleges shared this role with the universities that also offered programmes at the sub-bachelor levels, including the new foundation degree (Parry 2006).

In the event, colleges maintained rather than expanded their overall higher education numbers. Some individual colleges did expand their provision, often among the larger providers. Elsewhere, this was not the case, despite a significant amount of effort by colleges to build their numbers from a (usually) small base.

By 2009-10, there were 177,000 higher education students taught in the further education sector in England (around one in twelve of the total higher education population). Sixty-one per cent were undergraduate students studying mainly for sub-bachelor qualifications, with a minority undertaking bachelor courses. Just over half of the undergraduate students were studying full-time. Apart from a small number on postgraduate programmes (two per cent), the remaining students (37 per cent) were enrolled part-time on 'non-prescribed' courses leading to assorted higher-level vocational, professional and technical qualifications.

Nearly all general further education colleges (225 out of 225) and the majority of specialist colleges (25 out of 33) offered higher education courses. Only a minority of sixth form colleges (34 out of 91) provided one or more courses of higher education. Most colleges had small numbers of students and programmes, but there were 52 larger providers (each with over 1000 students) that taught one-half of all higher education students in the further education sector.

The majority of colleges were funded in more than one way for their higher education, with close to one-half (45 per cent) drawing on two funding routes: indirect HEFCE funding for undergraduate programmes plus funding from the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) or other non-HEFCE sources for non-prescribed courses. More than one-third of colleges (37 per cent) relied on three funding routes: direct and indirect funding from HEFCE and from the SFA or other non-HEFCE sources.

Given the importance of franchising, some 245 colleges (70 per cent of the total) and 68 higher education institutions (48 per cent of the total) were involved in indirect funding partnerships. Among the latter, two-thirds were post-1992 universities, with 16 in partnership with ten or more colleges. Twenty pre-1992 universities also operated indirect funding arrangements, generally with a smaller number of college partners. On their side, most colleges were in partnership with one, two or three higher education institutions.

For a relatively small segment of higher education, the college contribution was complex, diverse and distributed. This complexity deepened even as overall numbers remained stable. In the academic and policy literature, several explanations have been put forward for the slow pace or absence of growth (Parry *et al* 2012). One has to do with the variety and specificity of the markets for students and for the work-focused courses sought by employers for their employees. In these circumstances, responsiveness by colleges to the needs of local communities and regional economies does not translate easily into broader and stronger demand for higher education.

A second has to do with the low visibility and status of higher education in colleges, reflecting a wider view of further education in general and vocational education and training in particular. A third explanation is in terms of the divided structures, dual processes and semi-compulsory partnerships required by a two-sector system which, it

is claimed, have hindered the development of policy and provision. Lastly, there is the argument, led by HEFCE, that some colleges have been insufficiently strategic in their thinking, planning and management of higher education.

## **References**

Higher Education Funding Council for England (1995) *Higher education in further education colleges: funding the relationship*. Bristol: HEFCE.

Moodie, G. (2008) *From Vocational to Higher Education. An International Perspective*. Maidenhead: Open University Press and SRHE.

Parry, G. (2003) Mass Higher Education and the English: Wherein the Colleges?, *Higher Education Quarterly*, 57 (4), pp. 308-337.

Parry, G. (2006) Policy-Participation Trajectories in English Higher Education, *Higher Education Quarterly*, 60 (4), pp. 392-412.

Parry, G., Callender, C., Scott, P. and Temple, P. (2012) *Understanding Higher Education in Further Education Colleges*, BIS Research Report Number 69. London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.