

Recoupling sub-bachelor qualifications and further education colleges

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Abstract

Following their advance in the post-war years and their eclipse under binary policies from the 1960s, sub-bachelor qualifications and their coupling with further education colleges have been rediscovered as policy goals in English higher education. The shifting relationships between these qualifications and further education institutions are part of the hidden history of the English system. The sectors and institutions in which vocational diplomas and certificate have been taught derive from larger policies and movements. In the modern era, these qualifications have never been the exclusive preserve of non-higher education establishments, despite attempts in the 1950s to recognise area colleges for this purpose; and efforts since the 1990s to concentrate these levels of higher education in the further education sector. The anomalies, overlaps and ambivalences accompanying this history have injected into these zones a remarkable degree of complexity, with implications for democratisation of access and processes of diversion.

Paper

Only at two points in the history of English higher education since 1945 has a policy to couple sub-bachelor qualifications with further education colleges been pursued by central government. In the first, during the 1950s, specific categories of further education institution were defined according to the volume and type of higher education they taught. In the second, following mass expansion, government policies from the late 1990s have sought to increase the share of sub-bachelor education taken by the further education sector. In the intervening decades, the polytechnics were established and expanded to lead the growth of undergraduate education in the (then) further education system. As a result of national policies to concentrate full-time higher education in the strongest institutions, the majority of colleges were expected to focus their mission on non-advanced further education. The mostly part-time higher education that remained with the colleges was less a strategic priority for central government, with its distribution between institutions largely a matter for individual local authorities.

The shifting relationships between sub-bachelor qualifications and further education colleges are part of the hidden history of English higher education (Shattock, 2012). Before the designation of colleges of advanced technology in 1956, the higher national diplomas and certificates taught in these colleges accounted for most of the students on advanced courses in the further education system. In that year, a four-fold classification of further education establishments came into operation. Although they were not intended as closed categories, they recognised that colleges had differing traditions,

served different needs and, in relation to higher education, were at different stages evolution (Parry, 2014).

On the highest rung of the further education ladder were ten colleges of advanced technology intended by the Ministry to be exclusively concerned with advanced work, most leading to degree or degree-equivalent qualifications and studied on a full-time basis. Higher education students were also in a majority at 25 regional colleges where, at the time of the Robbins inquiry (Committee on Higher Education, 1963), most were studying part-time during the day or evening for a range of advanced qualifications. These colleges were envisaged as centres in which the main development of new advanced full-time courses might be expected. Beneath them were some 165 area colleges where lower-level work predominated and where all their advanced programmes led to part-time sub-bachelor qualifications. In a fourth category of local colleges, there was usually no advanced work of any kind.

Here then was an explicit attempt to categorise further education colleges in respect of their capacity for advanced level work in different modes and at different levels, including a tier of establishments – area colleges – chiefly or only concerned with sub-bachelor qualifications. Whether viewed as a functional hierarchy or a developmental model, its purchase on a further education system owned and controlled by local authorities was always likely to prove difficult. In the event, it was undermined and ended by the binary and polytechnic policies supported by all governments from the 1960s through to the 1980s.

Only in respect of the polytechnics and other large providers of advanced education was there a strategy on where growth in local authority higher education should be supported and directed. The expansion of the polytechnics and their emergence as national institutions led first to a planning body for local authority higher education and then to the removal of these institutions from local government. The colleges with higher education as a minority of their provision, along with those with no advanced work, remained with the local authorities. After a short period, they too were removed from local government.

Although the polytechnics came to rival the universities in the number of full-time degree students they recruited, the former local authority institutions continued to offer some of their courses at the sub-bachelor levels. Where previously these were free-standing short-cycle qualifications, these same programmes now functioned also as staged or transfer qualifications within a modular curriculum. As a result, the teaching of sub-bachelor higher education evolved as a shared responsibility of the polytechnics and the colleges. A key purpose in creating a separate sector for the polytechnics at the end of the 1980s was to concentrate advanced education in one sector and non-advanced work in another. However, into the new further education sector established for colleges came an assortment of higher education courses and other higher level qualifications offered by these establishments.

Given the assumptive architecture of the new sectors, higher education qualifications in the further education sector were officially viewed as residual, and expected to decline over time. That presumption was rejected in the 1990s and, in line with the recommendations of the Dearing report (National Committee of Inquiry, 1997), a second attempt was made to designate sub-bachelor higher education as special mission of further education colleges. The context this time was a deepening financial crisis arising from mass expansion, with pressures on government to share the costs of renewed growth with students and stimulate demand for work-focused qualifications in low-cost settings. The foundation degree, another sub-bachelor qualification, was invented to break the hold of the bachelor degree. Nevertheless, after nearly two decades of policy push, the proportion of the higher education population taught in further education colleges has declined rather than expanded; and sub-bachelor education has remained a shared responsibility with universities (and now with private providers).

Over the whole period, the sectors and institutions in which vocational diplomas and certificates (and, later, foundation degrees) have been taught derive from larger policies and movements. Neither the pre-Robbins categorisations nor the post-Dearing interventions led to these qualifications being taught predominantly in one set of institutions. The anomalies, overlaps and ambivalences accompanying this history have injected into these zones a remarkable degree of complexity, with implications for democratisation of access, patterns of transfer and processes of diversion (Dougherty 2001). In short, the assortment and confusion of sub-bachelor qualifications now offered by a variety of competing and collaborating providers is unlikely to have made lower-tier higher education a simple or attractive pathway by which to broaden participation.

References

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