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Outline

This paper seeks to contribute to the debate around the purpose and position of college-based higher education (CBHE) in England by engaging with the key literature and also through analysing the available statistics that may identify how processes associated with social background interact with CBHE. It attempts to conceptualise the expectations made of the sector to better understand what it can and cannot offer in relation to those expectations. Though the context here is English, the reshaping of certain elements of HE to meet economic and social policy commitments is reflected globally (Avis and Orr 2016) and so this paper has a wider resonance. Currently around 159,000 students study on higher education courses in further education colleges in England (AoC 2016) and CBHE has accounted for around ten percent of total HE provision for many years. Nevertheless, the Government's 2016 White Paper on HE made little reference to CBHE but it did assert that "The growth in FE colleges and alternative providers offering higher education has significantly changed the marketplace and how students study" (DBIS 2016: 15). This assertion about what has changed echoes how CBHE in England has consistently been tasked by policymakers with addressing perceived skills gaps, especially at a local level, as well as enhancing social mobility in the country (ETF 2016, 22). The allusion to "alternative providers" may, however, also indicate risks to CBHE.

The government is committed to doubling the proportion of people from disadvantaged backgrounds entering HE by 2020 compared with 2009. To that end, there is strong evidence that HE students in colleges are more likely to be older, to study part-time and to come from less advantaged backgrounds than those in universities. Arguably, CBHE has been successful in widening participation in HE, though that does not necessarily imply social mobility for those students, even by limited definitions, never mind enhancing social justice more generally. There is much less evidence, however, for CBHE meeting the other expectation of systematically connecting to the particular needs of local economies (ETF 2016, 23). It may be happening in some regions, but there is as yet little data on which to base a judgement. Associated with this policy of localism are recent moves to devolution of city regions such as Greater Manchester, which will have responsibility for skills training. Along with the publication of Lord Sainsbury's review on technical and professional education and the government's commitment to higher-level apprenticeships the expectation for CBHE to relate to local economies will continue, however difficult that may be to achieve. A further challenge to colleges offering HE is the government's commitment that "any high quality predominantly degree-level provider" can apply for degree awarding powers (DBIS 2016, 29). Quite what "predominantly" entails is as yet unclear, but it is unlikely to include mixed economy further education colleges. Even where those colleges have very substantial HE provision, this does not predominate over other provision.

Within this context of rising expectations and growing challenges, this paper examines official statistics for CBHE to analyse its current role in relation to widening participation and meeting the needs of local economies. It argues that colleges offering HE courses can have a part in promoting social justice at an individual level, but only if there is an emphasis on curriculum and not just method of delivery. Furthermore, CBHE may also contribute to what Hodgson and Spours (2013) have called “local learning ecologies”.

Avis, J. & Orr, K. (2016) HE in FE: vocationalism, class and social justice, *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 21:1-2, 49-65

DBIS (2016) *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility & Student Choice (White Paper)* London: DBIS.

ETF (2016) *The Local Impact of College-Based Higher Education*, London: ETF.

Hodgson, A. & Spours, K. (2013) Tackling the crisis facing young people: building ‘high opportunity progression eco-systems’ *Oxford Review of Education*, 39 (2) 211-228.