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**Title** Higher education in colleges: why isn't there more of it?  
**Session** Cheap, local and distinctive? Possible futures for college-based HE in competitive HE markets: evidence from Australia, Canada and England (Bathmaker)  
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## Higher education in colleges: why isn't there more of it?

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### Abstract

The three rationales for higher education in colleges in Anglophone countries are that it can: expand access to HE for disadvantaged students; result in HE aligned with the needs of the workplace; and, be cheaper for governments and individuals compared to university provision. Many of us researching college HE thought that it would grow quickly and become a principal means to support the expansion of HE. However, it has failed to do so. Why? The paper explores two limitations on the growth of college HE: first, government ambivalence and intermittent aspirations for differentiation; and second, government marketisation policies that compel colleges to compete with universities in a stratified and hierarchical market structured by positional goods. It uses Trow's framework of elite, mass and universal HE and Burton Clark's 'triangle of coordination' to explore the roles of the state, the market and academic coordination of HE.

### Paper

Higher education in colleges emerged as a distinct form of provision in many Anglophone countries around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The three rationales for HE in colleges are that it: can expand access to HE for disadvantaged students; aligns HE with the needs of the workplace; and, is cheaper for governments and students. Many of us researching college HE about 10 – 15 years ago thought that it would become a principal means for the expansion of HE (Bathmaker et al. 2008, Author 2009). But it did not.

The paper is a theoretical reflection on two research projects completed in 2009 and 2012 which were led by the author in Australia (Author 2009, 2012) and one project led by the author and completed in 2017 in Ontario, Canada (Author 2017). All three projects had a similar research design and included: analysis of the policy literature; exploration of relevant quantitative data; and, interviews with policy

leaders, students, teachers and institutional leaders (159 interviews in Australia; 92 interviews in Canada). This paper also reflects on research by other colleagues in Australia (Gale et al. 2013, Webb et al. 2017), Canada (Skolnik 2009, 2012, 2013), and the UK (Bathmaker 2016, Bathmaker et al. 2008, Parry 2009, Parry et al. 2012, Gallacher 2009, 2014).

The paper explores two limitations on the growth of college HE: first, government ambivalence and intermittent aspirations for differentiation; and second, government marketisation policies that compel colleges to compete with universities in a stratified and hierarchical market structured by positional goods. The paper's theoretical frameworks includes Trow's (1974) framework of elite, mass and universal HE; Marginson's (2016a, 2016b,) framework of High Participation Systems; and, Clark's (1983) 'triangle of coordination' (state, market and academic oligarchy).

The paper argues that HE in colleges opens new opportunities for students, while contributing to stratification and maintenance of inequality (Author 2016). In universal systems, access to HE mediates access to jobs, and to participation in society (Trow 1974, 2005; Marginson 2016a; Scott 2005). The mechanism for the social reproduction of relations of privilege and inequality is now premised on *relative* advantage (Marginson 2016a). Starting positions are unequal and different forms of participation in HE confer different levels of social and economic advantage. HE systems in Anglophone liberal market economies (LMEs) are structured as a positional good in a partly zero-sum game (Marginson 2016b). Students compete with each other for access to elite universities because they provide access to the elite professions and to high status social outcomes. The competition for positional goods shapes the rest of HE by hierarchically structuring institutions and programs, which is further compounded by government policies for markets.

Clark (1983) argued that HE systems are structured by relations of coordination between the state, the market and 'academic oligarchy'. This shows that while one component may be more dominant than the other at any time (for example, markets), nonetheless all three are present, and that the shape of the market is as a consequence of government policies. For example, in Ontario, the government is emphasising policies of differentiation more than markets, and it limits the amount of degree provision colleges may offer. Colleges must also offer *applied* degrees in contrast to universities, which have no such restriction. In Australia, colleges compete with universities and private providers to offer degrees in a marketised system, but this is in a market where only universities have access to public funding. In the UK, government has implemented an 'organised-market' in which state regulation and funding steer system outcomes; college HE is positioned as second chance provision thus ensuring continued status differentiation between colleges and universities (Webb et al. 2017). In all three countries, the power of the academic oligarchy is reflected in the conditions that are put on colleges in accessing public funding, and in accreditation requirements that reflect university-centric models of HE (Association of Colleges 2015, Skolnik 2013, Author 2012).

Colleges are either explicitly limited by governments in the kind of provision they can offer, and/or they have conditional access to HE markets. Ultimately, the market in Anglophone LMEs compounds any restrictions by governments on college HE, because colleges cannot win against universities in HE markets structured by reputation, prestige and positional goods. In seeking markets for HE, governments in LMEs have ultimately undermined the conditions needed to support substantial growth in college HE.

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