

**Serial number** 0106  
**Title** What College-Based Higher Education in England is and what it might be  
**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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## What College-Based Higher Education in England is and what it might be

England's Further Education (FE) colleges or their antecedents have provided higher education (HE) courses for over a century (Bailey and Unwin, 2014) and the proportion of HE provided in colleges has consistently been around ten per cent for at least the past twenty years (Avis and Orr 2016). Parry identifies (2016, 103) "the regular rediscovery of college higher education in official narratives" that has continued sporadically to the present with the last government claiming that, "The growth in FE colleges and alternative providers offering higher education has significantly changed the marketplace and how students study" (DBIS 2016: 15), even though there is little evidence to support that assertion. Many FE colleges have invested in premises that are devoted solely to their HE courses in order to create or preserve what has been referred to as "HEness" (Lea and Simmons 2012) but despite this attempt to be like other higher education institutions, there have simultaneously been persistent claims that college-based higher education (CBHE) is distinctive from other HE provision. For substantial periods since the 1944 Education Act, the stated intention of national policymakers with responsibility for CBHE was that it should, distinctively, support "growth and diversity in higher education, and ... meet the needs of industry and the labour market for young people and adults with higher-level vocational skills and qualifications" (Parry 2016, 86). The Mixed Economy Group of colleges, all of which offer HE courses, similarly states that

Higher Education offered in Colleges of Further Education is achieving increased recognition as a growing and responsive part of the wider higher education landscape. Colleges offer value for money HE courses which are available locally and respond to the needs of employers.

They attract students who might otherwise be unable to study for higher level qualifications to progress not only in their studies but also in their careers.

(Widdowson 2017)

That distinctiveness may soon be under greater scrutiny. Vignoles (2017) has argued that since 40 per cent or more of student loans in England will not be repaid that means that 40 per cent or more of HE provision is being more substantially subsidized by public money than the rest. Since those graduating from CBHE are likely to earn less (Avis and Orr 2016) and so are likely to pay less of their loan back, it is, in part, CBHE that is being disproportionately subsidized. Is that disproportionate subsidy justifiable?

This paper firstly examines CBHE's claims for distinctiveness that relate to the local economy and to widening participation by examining current statistics and research. It uses Marginson's (2016, 413) concept of "vertical 'stretching' of stratification in competitive HPS [high participation systems of HE]" to analyse the position of CBHE.

CBHE has suffered from three factors that are associated with this stratification and which, according to Wolf (2016, 10) "account for much in our current system, and for much that of what is wrong with it." These factors are:

- Uniquely inchoate arrangements for providing both sub-degree tertiary and lower-level vocational and occupational courses.
- A university system which is unusually uniform in its institutional structures, and which lacks incentives to generate diverse or innovative approaches.
- A funding system which encourages expansion, generates large outstanding costs for the taxpayer, and militates against any form of price competition.

(Wolf 2016, 10)

Yet despite these head winds and whether distinctive or not, whether actively promoted by government policy or not, CBHE has endured for many decades. This persistence suggests that CBHE is perceived as having a role, at least by those who access it. So, secondly, we make a case for attention to be turned from seeking justifications for CBHE provision towards the merit of the CBHE curriculum and how it is taught.

The Education and Training Foundation (ETF) has carried out research that indicates that CBHE students are more likely to be from the area local to the college. CBHE students are, moreover, more likely to be mature, part-time and from areas that have lower participation in HE than students at universities. CBHE students are also more likely to be pursuing occupationally-focussed courses than are university-based students (ETF 2016, 22-23). The claim for connection to the local economy is, however, less well founded; “While slightly more college-based HE can be linked to LEP [Local Enterprise Partnership] priorities it is not clear how such priorities relate to the scale or level of skills needed in the local workforce” (Ibid., 23). The claim to be local is problematic also in that it while it may distinguish CBHE, it may also trivialise it: local may also imply not universally attractive.

Efforts to widen participation in CBHE have made the provision more complicated than the standard three-year full-time undergraduate course. Without attention to the curriculum, moreover, the claim for widening participation may reflect what Crouch (2004, 112) has referred to in other circumstances as “the maximum level of minimal participation”. We conclude by discussing what quality in CBHE might mean. Drawing on the tradition of adult education from which it emerged vocational CBHE at its best can provide education that is an intervention into the world that reveals the deceit of power (Scruton 2013) and that reduces alienation, while also being a preparation for work.

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