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Research article

The bachelor's degree in college systems: history, evidence and argument from England

Jennifer Allen,[1,*] Gareth Parry[2]

[1] Independent Researcher and SKOPE Associate, Department of Education, University of Oxford, UK
[2] School of Education, University of Sheffield, UK
* Correspondence: jennifer.allen@sthildas.oxon.org

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Abstract

Across major anglophone college systems, institutions in various jurisdictions have gained the authority to award the bachelor's degree. That prospect has come late to further education colleges in England. With its long history of teaching for the bachelor's degree, the English road to awarding powers has features in common with and different from those in North America and Australia. In the modern-day literature on college higher education in England, little attention has been given to the bachelor's degree in its own right. Accordingly, a summary history and a digest of quantitative and qualitative evidence are assembled. Domestic debates are reviewed. Issues for policy and research are signalled. In this way, a platform is provided by which to better connect with international debates and comparisons.

Keywords awarding powers; bachelor's degrees; colleges; further education; higher education; partnerships; students

Introduction

The establishment and extension of the bachelor's degree in modern-day college systems is a matter of continuing debate. Where colleges are seeking or gaining the right to award their own baccalaureate degrees, the issues are large. Traditions and conventions are disturbed, if not overturned. Governments are directly involved, sometimes as the prime movers. Quality and regulatory bodies are summoned into action. Colleges expect to gain in educational standing, funding and recruitment. Institutional titles and classifications are adjusted. Universities look to review their relationships with colleges. The returns to students, their communities and the economy acquire increasing significance, not least for politicians and policymakers.

These are contested areas, some with long histories. Typically, the arguments run in two directions. On the one side are rationales keyed to local access, affordable costs, unmet workforce needs and institutional maturity. From this perspective, the bachelor's degree is but a logical extension of the college role in bringing higher education to underserved populations and addressing the needs of the local economy. On the other side are concerns about mission drift, diversion of demand and the comparability of standards and outcomes as between college-taught and university-taught degrees. In this view, the college baccalaureate degree is a departure from the traditional mission of these institutions and a potential threat to their core values (Floyd et al., 2005).

Advocacy for college awarding powers followed by authorisation by state legislatures has been an emerging trend in anglophone systems, especially in North America (from the 1980s) and Australia (from the 2000s). In the United States, nearly half of the states now permit community colleges to award baccalaureate degrees. Likewise, governments in the major provinces of Canada and Australia have authorised individual colleges to confer bachelor's degrees. By comparison, degree awarding powers have come late to further education colleges in England. To date, only one college (more accurately, a college group) has been granted full taught degree awarding powers.

Aims, methods and sources

In this article, we provide a synoptic account of the bachelor's degree in establishments of technical and further education in England. While the college-taught bachelor's degree figured large in institutional and policy histories of English higher education, its more recent context and character have been under-investigated. In our overview, we bring together its long history and contemporary dimensions. Four aspects are outlined and discussed.

In the first, the teaching of college courses leading to degrees is traced, from its beginnings in the nineteenth century through to its present-day validated, subcontracted and college-awarded forms. The main sources reviewed are standard historical works, published policy documents and official statistics on students in further and higher education.

In the second, we review quantitative evidence on the current scale, scope and spread of college and student participation in the bachelor's degree. Their contributions to widening participation are reported. The outcomes for college and university graduates are compared. Our quantitative data were derived from published statistics, survey reports and research studies. In addition, data were prepared by the Office for Students (OfS) on breakdowns of student numbers by level and mode of study. To identify college-taught franchise numbers and proportions, splits were provided between registering and teaching providers.

The third aspect of our account is concerned with qualitative evidence. Here, we add to the literature with findings drawn from research completed by the first author (Allen, 2016). This compared the decisions, experiences, expectations and outcomes of students undertaking parallel bachelor's programmes in colleges and universities in two regions of England (Yorkshire and the West Midlands). The research was undertaken between 2011 and 2016 for the doctor of philosophy (DPhil) degree at the University of Oxford. Using expert interviews (N = 8), semi-structured interviews with course leaders (N =

2) and with students (N = 30), and a student questionnaire (N = 78), the research reported on the higher education journeys of those in the final year of bachelor's degrees in business in 2013.

A fourth aspect is addressed to the domestic debates accompanying this history, especially the roles to be accorded to colleges in higher education, the impacts on the mission of colleges, and the arguments adduced for college distinctiveness. Our discussion is informed in part by American literatures on community college education, and by the commentaries of American scholars on English further education. In a concluding section, issues are identified for policy and research.

An all-important aim of the article is to better connect the English experience with international scholarship on the college-taught and college-conferred baccalaureate degree. Authorisations for colleges to award their own bachelor's degree have been the stimulus for a literature documenting the effects of approaches taken in states, provinces and national jurisdictions (Floyd et al., 2012; Skolnik, 2016; Skolnik et al., 2018; Webb et al., 2020b). Studies of college undergraduate education as a whole have also been brought into the same field of literature (Kadi-Hanifi and Elliott, 2016; Bathmaker, 2017; Webb et al., 2020a; Knight et al., 2022).

In England, the bachelor's degree and other types of college higher education have been reported and analysed together. They too have a presence in this literature, although the shifts and complexities that attend to English arrangements have been a frequent source of difficulty, not just for home country observers (Parry, 2009). Another perplexity is whether the United Kingdom, or each of its four nations, or combinations thereof, is the chosen unit for analysis.

The directions and distinctive shapes taken by college higher education in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have been the subject of country studies and 'home international' comparisons (Parry, 2003a; Parry et al., 2017). In the post-devolution era, evidence of divergence or convergence with England has been of keen interest (Gallacher and Raffe, 2012; Riddell et al., 2016).

Our focus is on England. It is by far the largest of the two-sector systems of higher and further education in the UK. Greater numbers are pursuing bachelor's degrees in its further education sector than elsewhere. More of its college higher education is devoted to this level of undergraduate education. Only in England, under the market-led policies of recent governments, has the possibility of degree awarding powers been held out to further education colleges. New routes to different types of awarding powers are now in prospect.

Historical patterns and policy movements

In England, degrees are legally owned by the awarding organisation, not by the state. The power to award degrees, however, is regulated by law. Generally, a high bar was set for institutions to gain degree awarding powers and the university title. Except for universities created *ab initio*, this usually required a lengthy apprenticeship. Like the titles 'university' and 'university college', the term 'degree' is protected in law. By contrast, other types of award (such as diploma and certificate) and the title 'college' are not so protected.

Historically, the power to award the degree was normally granted only to universities, usually by Royal Charter, although occasionally by Act of Parliament. The degrees offered by technical colleges from the end of the nineteenth century up to the 1960s were nearly all awarded by one university, the University of London. Those taught by further education establishments in the next phase were awarded by a national body created to serve the non-university sector, the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA). When the leading providers of higher education were removed from the further education sector in the late 1980s and became universities in the early 1990s, their degree awarding powers were authorised by the Privy Council (a body of advisers to the monarch).

In a third phase, the colleges which remained in the further education sector were dependent on individual universities for the validation of their degree courses. During the 2000s and 2010s, degree titles and awarding powers were amended, reformed and brought within reach of a wider group of providers. Responsibility for decisions on degree awarding powers passed to a new regulatory body for higher education in England, the OfS. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) was the body designated to assess applications and provide advice to the OfS.

Technical colleges and the degree of the University of London (1850s–1960s)

During the second half of the nineteenth century, technical colleges were founded in most major cities, often with their roots in earlier institutions. Built up with newly available funds from local taxes ('rates') and central grants in the 1880s and 1890s, a number passed from private to municipal (local government) ownership. By the end of the century, several were providing at least some advanced instruction in scientific and technical subjects, usually on a part-time basis. From the 1920s, their higher-level provision included national certificates and diplomas in engineering, applied sciences and, later, commerce, again mostly undertaken part-time (Pratt, 2000).

Side by side with these qualifications in the larger colleges were courses preparing 'external' students for the degree examinations of the University of London (Duke, 1967; Harte, 1986). When the Robbins Committee came to review the pattern of higher education in Great Britain in the 1960s, the London degree was still the main or only way that further education establishments were able to teach for the bachelor's degree. As 'one of the notable educational inventions of the nineteenth century', it provided 'the possibility of academic qualification for many thousands of people who had no opportunity of entering a university' (Committee on Higher Education, 1963: 140).

Increased demand for higher education in the further education sector saw repeated efforts to concentrate full-time degree-level work in selected institutions. Those designated as colleges of advanced technology (CATs) in the 1950s were the first to be chosen for this purpose. Apart from the London degree, the CATs taught courses leading to a new qualification, the Diploma in Technology (DipTech). This was a four-year full-time course in technological subjects which included one or more periods of industrial training. It was awarded by the National Council for Technological Awards (NCTA). Although not a degree, the DipTech was required to be of the same standard as the honours degree.

As CATs, they dropped their part-time and lower-level work. They became much less 'comprehensive' in their course provision and student intake (Burgess and Pratt, 1970). In 1966, 10 CATs were granted university charters and, with that, the power to award their own degrees. Only institutions with operational autonomy and academic self-government could award their own degrees, neither of which was possessed by the remaining local authority colleges (Shattock, 2012). London degrees and the DipTech continued to be taught in some 25 regional colleges. Then it was the turn of regional and other colleges to be brought together to form 30 polytechnics. The new set of institutions was expected to concentrate wholly or largely on higher education ('advanced') courses. They would be the chief location for the full-time bachelor's degree within the further education system (Pratt, 1997).

Polytechnics, colleges and the Council for National Academic Awards (1960s–1990s)

Alongside the polytechnics were over 70 higher education colleges, themselves created by mergers arising from the reorganisation of teacher education in the 1970s (Locke et al., 1985). A substantial amount of full-time degree work was also undertaken at specialist colleges. That left area and local colleges – in excess of four hundred establishments – responsible for most of the non-advanced further education in the sector, but, like today, many provided courses leading to sub-degree and professional qualifications (Parry, 2016).

The NCTA (which could only award the DipTech) was replaced by the aforementioned CNAA (which could award degrees across all major fields). The need for London degree arrangements was thereby removed, but not entirely. Individual universities validated programmes at a variety of home and overseas institutions. Unlike the London degree, the NCTA had allowed colleges to construct their own courses and conduct their own examinations. The same principles informed the work of the CNAA.

Under a binary policy supported by all subsequent British governments, a larger share of demand for undergraduate degrees would be taken by further education institutions, notably the polytechnics. By the beginning of the 1980s, the polytechnics were responsible for almost three quarters of the degree work in the non-university sector (CNAA , 1979). Under a national planning body set up for local authority higher education, their degree enrolments rivalled those of the universities.

The polytechnics and other higher education colleges were then removed from local government control and given their own funding body. In acknowledgement of their academic maturity, the polytechnics were given increased responsibility ('accreditation') for validating courses leading to CNAA degrees (Silver, 1990). Awarding powers and university status then followed. Under legislation passed in

1992, they joined with other universities in a new (unified) sector of higher education. At the same time, the CNAA was abolished.

Further education colleges and validation by degree-granting institutions (1990s–2010s)

Under the same legislation, the further education colleges under local authority control were 'incorporated'. Powers over property, staffing and courses were transferred from local government to college governing bodies and college leaders. As self-governing colleges, they were given wide scope to make decisions. Yet this was always a qualified independence. Unlike for institutions in the new higher education sector, there was no 'arm's length' principle to guide the funding, management and inspection of further education colleges. New powers of oversight and intervention in the college sector were given to central government. Policy levers were used by ministers to ensure compliance with government instructions and required rapid responses to changes in policy (Hodgson, 2015).

Of the 465 colleges in the new further education sector, over 300 provided courses of higher education (DfEE , n.d.). Courses recognised as 'prescribed' higher education (degrees and other types of undergraduate provision) were the responsibility of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Colleges were funded directly or under 'franchise' arrangements (whereby the teaching of some courses was subcontracted by universities to colleges). Higher-level professional and technical qualifications ('non-prescribed' higher education) were overseen – and mostly overlooked – by a succession of funding bodies for further education.

Degrees were validated by universities, mainly the former polytechnics. The other major undergraduate qualifications – higher national diplomas and higher national certificates – were awarded (from 2005) by a proprietary organisation (Pearson). Some universities awarded the same qualifications under licence from Pearson.

Over the next three decades, government and HEFCE policies on higher education in the further education sector were directed primarily at sub-bachelor provision, the largest part of college higher education. Only following a recommendation of the Dearing Committee (NCIHE , 1997) was there a short-lived attempt to curtail funding and recruitment to the bachelor's degree. The committee believed that much of the increased demand for undergraduate education would be at the sub-degree levels, which did not turn out to be the case.

First, to stimulate demand for sub-bachelor higher education, a new two-year qualification – the foundation degree – was launched in 2001. Its significance for the bachelor's degree in England was two-fold. This was the first time that the title of 'degree' had been bestowed on a sub-bachelor qualification. Second, one of its key design features was the requirement for an identified progression route on to the final stage of a bachelor's degree. Although colleges already made arrangements for diploma and certificate students to transfer to the bachelor's degree, usually at a partner university, the foundation degree gave impetus to the 'top-up degree' taught within the college. For a number of colleges, this was their first or most common engagement with the bachelor's degree.

Popular demand for the full-time bachelor's degree in universities continued undiminished, despite the reintroduction of tuition fees payable by students in the 1990s. A near tripling of fee levels in the next decade, and again in the following decade, did little to dent demand. Nor had different categories of fee-loans resulted in 'meaningful price competition' in undergraduate education (NAO , 2017). The fees charged by colleges were generally lower than for universities, but with little effect on their enrolments. More intense competition followed the ending of controls on undergraduate numbers from 2015, which saw several universities taking back some or all of their franchised places in colleges.

These were among the policies intended to 'level the playing field' in higher education, especially for private providers (DfE , 2017). The removal of 'unnecessary' barriers standing in the way of awarding powers and university titles was central to this purpose. After 2017, institutions without a track record of provision at the bachelor level were able to access awarding powers on a probationary basis. Unchanged however was the stipulation that normally the majority of higher education students should be enrolled on courses at the bachelor's level or above.

In 2016, the one further education college to gain full taught degree awarding powers had to meet the student number threshold and the (then) track record requirement of at least four years' consecutive experience of providing programmes at a level equivalent to the bachelor's degree with honours (BIS ,

2004; QAA , 2016). Following legislation in 2007, the same college had earlier gained the right to award the foundation degree. Another seven colleges have since achieved this status.

In the previous system, full taught degree awarding powers extended up to the master's level. There was now the possibility of applying for more limited powers, such as only for the bachelor's degree or on a subject-specific basis. In the first instance, all providers gaining degree awarding powers were granted these on a time-limited basis (QAA , 2019).

Quantitative evidence: students, providers, partnerships and outcomes

Our concern in this section is with quantitative and survey evidence, mainly for the contemporary period. Apart from externally funded research studies, smaller investigations of college higher education have been undertaken by a variety of sector organisations and interest groups. Rarely, if at all, has the college-taught bachelor's degree been studied on its own account. Here, we do no more than extract key findings from wider studies. They fold into our later discussion of academic and policy matters.

Below, we report on linked administrative data prepared for us by the OfS. Except for ad hoc statistical releases (DfE , 2021), data based on the linking of student records for further and higher education is not published on a regular basis.

Student numbers, patterns and trends

In 2019/20, some 22,000 college students were studying for the bachelor's degree in England. Full-time students totalled 20,000, leaving one in eight studying on a part-time basis. The majority (around 18,000) were registered and taught at the same college. Close to 4,000 were franchise students. They were taught by the college but registered at another institution, usually a university.

Thirty years earlier, when further education colleges entered their new sector, enrolments for the bachelor's degree stood at 15,000 (DfE , n.d.). The addition of franchise students, estimated to be a higher proportion than now, would bring these numbers close to the current total. At all points since incorporation, the college numbers have been dwarfed by the rest of the bachelor's population taught at higher education institutions (including, in recent years, at private providers). Their enrolments more than doubled over this period, from 695,000 to 1,462,000. Within college higher education, the share taken by the bachelor's degree increased (from one-tenth to one-fifth), due chiefly to the decline in sub-bachelor numbers.

Unlike the bachelor's population in universities, where approaching one in six were now international students paying premium fees, college recruitment has been predominantly domestic and local. The small college numbers have also to do with their use of top-up degrees. After two or more years of study for a sub-bachelor qualification, completion of a top-up degree would normally require the equivalent of one year of full-time higher education. In the typical all-through full-time undergraduate degree at English universities, this would be counted as three years of bachelor's education.

Colleges and partnerships

In 2019/20, teaching at the bachelor level was offered by around three quarters of the further education colleges currently registered with the OfS for their higher education. Most had full-time equivalent bachelor numbers between 50 and 200. At the biggest college provider, the number was over a thousand. At the smallest, it was five or fewer. Some 50 colleges used the title 'university centre' to signal their university-validated higher education (Ratcliffe, 2021). Use of the title was controlled by government, through the mechanism of a 'non-objection' letter.

Only at 15 colleges were numbers for the bachelor's degree bigger than those for sub-bachelor programmes. College by college, there was much variation in the balance between bachelor and sub-bachelor numbers. The main sub-bachelor courses operated as both stand-alone qualifications and as progression pathways to bachelor's degrees at the same or another institution. Not all college-taught sub-bachelor courses might have a dedicated top-up degree. Nor routinely might the bulk of recruitment come from within the college. Of those using the college to acquire the entry qualifications for higher

education (A levels, vocational awards and, for adults, access courses) most left for undergraduate courses at universities.

As a result of extensive merger activity, particularly since 2010, there were fewer colleges in England. Some were organised as college groups. A small number merged with higher education institutions to form Australian-style 'dual-sector universities' (Garrod and Macfarlane, 2007; Bathmaker et al., 2008). Since incorporation in 1992, a handful of specialist colleges left the further education sector, having met the threshold requirements for transfer to the higher education sector.

Mergers were a response to year-on-year reductions in public funding for further education. Funding for undergraduate education in colleges came from directly funded and indirectly funded (franchised) places. Later, it came mainly from fee income. Not only was higher education a welcome and separate income stream; it generated a higher average unit of resource than for courses of further education.

Most colleges had joint activities or direct partnerships with at least one university. These variously involved franchising, validation or progression agreements. The breadth and depth of the interface between colleges and universities was pronounced (Shattock and Hunt, 2021). Colleges frequently worked with more than one university partner. On their side, several universities had more than five college partners (Saraswat et al., 2015). Long-distance collaborations were not uncommon.

Validation and franchising now operate in more capricious times. Since the lifting of the cap on undergraduate numbers, the share of college higher education taken by franchising has fallen significantly, and by a much larger margin in sub-bachelor higher education than for the bachelor's degree. The involvement of colleges in new-style higher and degree apprenticeships has not significantly altered this picture.

Widening participation and outcomes

As the most distributed parts of the English higher education system, the degrees, diplomas and certificates taught in the college sector have long contributed to a widening of access and participation. Colleges recruited higher proportions of undergraduate students from low participation and disadvantaged neighbourhoods and more students from their local area. The majority were women. They were older than their counterparts in the higher education sector. They entered with a broader range of qualifications and experience of work. Fewer had A levels (the main qualifications recognised for university entrance in England) as their highest entry qualification. At the same time, non-continuation rates were higher in the college sector (HEFCE , 2012, 2013; Parry et al., 2012).

Since 2015, information on graduates with bachelor's degrees has been linked to income tax, social benefit and student loan records to provide a longitudinal picture of employment and earnings. For college-taught graduates, the findings were consistent with earlier surveys. They started their courses at a later age and were more likely to have a lower points score in their A levels, or hold just one or two A levels, or have an alternative qualification. After graduation, similar percentages were in sustained employment, with college leavers slightly less likely to be in further study.

There were differences too in the subject mix of college and university graduates. Those at colleges were more likely to have studied creative arts and design, and business and administrative studies. With the exception of engineering and technology, the median earnings of college graduates were lower for all subject categories. For graduate cohorts up to 10 years after graduation, the median graduate earnings from higher education institutions were larger than those from further education colleges.

Governments have made ever greater use of metrics as indicators in higher education, especially as proxies for quality and value for money. This came with cautions about comparing the outcomes of graduates from colleges and universities where the characteristics and circumstances of students were so different (DfE , 2018). Evidence assembled on the personal, social and educational benefits of college undergraduate education has been drawn mostly, but not exclusively, from qualitative studies.

Qualitative evidence: student decisions, experiences, expectations and outcomes

Qualitative studies about higher education in the further education sector are mainly addressed to aspects of teaching and learning, including student and staff engagement (Jones, 2006a, 2006b).

How the bachelor's degree is experienced in colleges is little researched (Henderson, 2020), although there is a growing literature on the experience of students moving from sub-bachelor qualifications to the bachelor's level (Greenbank, 2007; Winter and Dismore, 2010; Pike and Harrison, 2011; Morgan, 2013; Lavender, 2020; Welsh, 2020). Less common again are empirical studies which make direct comparisons with the bachelor's degree offered at universities, particularly when considered from the student perspective.

In this section, findings are reported from a study of students pursuing bachelor's degrees in business-related subjects at four further education colleges and two universities across two regions in England (Allen, 2016). The research explored the decisions, experiences, expectations and outcomes of students who were in the final year of their bachelor's degree in 2013.

Of the 30 students interviewed, 5 were taught at universities and the remaining 25 at colleges. All but one were studying on a full-time basis, although what 'full-time' meant in practice varied. The college student sample included examples of students who had progressed to top-up degrees immediately after completing sub-bachelor programmes in the same college. The age range of students interviewed at the four colleges (20 to 54) was wider than at the two universities (20 to 24). Among the college population interviewed were around 11 students similar in age to the university group. Of the 78 questionnaire respondents, 44 were students at colleges and 34 at universities. Across all questionnaire respondents, the average age was slightly above 25 years old.

A typology of student journeys

Four types of student journey were recognised: the Destined (university students); the Deciders (mature students); the Directed (younger college students); and the Drifters (younger college students). While these groupings first emerged in relation to the decision-making of students, they also illuminate distinctions by age and type of institution that surfaced throughout their higher education journeys.

University students: the journeys of the Destined

University students (the Destined) described their journey as pretty much inevitable, 'the path which seemed obvious':

> I've sort of always been interested in business and that sort of side of things and I've always wanted to work in the sort of business side of things, so it was just pretty standard for me to go and do a business degree really. (Edward, 22-year-old male university student)

Their decisions centred on *where* to go for higher education rather than *whether* to go. In choosing an institution, they considered factors such as its reputation, location and facilities, as well as course content:

> Obviously the content which would be discussed within the course, the facilities of the university, the price of accommodation in the area around the university, so you know cost of living basically, and that's about it really. (Matthew, 22-year-old male university student)

At universities, 'higher education' was omnipresent. It did not refer to precise places, people or pedagogy. 'Full-time' meant attending timetabled lectures and seminars throughout the working week alongside self-study.

Four university students had completed work placements. In three cases, these led directly to employment opportunities. In the fourth, it helped to secure a position:

> There's sort of merit in the practical side of things as well as the academic side of things and a bit more relevant experience can help you massively. (Edward, 23-year-old male university graduate)

College students: the journeys of the Deciders, the Directed and the Drifters

College students fell into one of three groups: those who made an active and considered choice to pursue higher education (the Deciders); those who were pushed into or pulled towards it (the Directed); and those who fell or wandered into it (the Drifters):

> *Decider:* I had a company and I'd got to the point where I felt I'd reached a ceiling. I would sit in accountants' meetings and I would not really understand what they were saying. I'd go to business meetings and not feel that I could hold my own in conversations, and so decided that I wanted to educate myself more. (Abigail, 39-year-old female college student)

> *Directed:* They don't push anything else on you at school ... we had someone come in and talk about apprenticeships to us at one point, but for the people in my course, it was always like uni, uni, uni sort of thing ... that was something that's pushed on you at a certain level. (Phoebe, 20-year-old female college student)

> *Drifter:* [I] didn't have a clue what I was going to do with my life because I didn't do A levels ... so then I came here because I thought it's quite a broad degree because I wasn't sure exactly what I wanted to do; it wasn't like too narrow for finding a job and stuff. (Lily, 20-year-old female college student)

Deciders were all mature students. Younger students were split between the Directed and the Drifters.

Regardless of age, college students chose a higher education provider based on constraints rather than preferences. Practicalities mattered. Finding a suitable 'where' determined 'whether' they went to higher education or not:

> I've got two children, so it was time as well – where can I get to? Obviously our nurseries ... open at a certain time in a morning and I can't leave the children at six o'clock to get anywhere else. (Lucy, 35-year-old female college student)

For the Directed and the Drifters, constraints were often related to prior attainment. Nearly half of the interviewees aged 24 or less had applied to go to university and not been accepted. Three others did not have the qualifications required to make an application.

When pursuing their degrees, friction was encountered between the worlds of higher education and further education. This dynamic was evident in how students were taught and how boundaries were marked or unmarked:

> We're doing a higher education course in a primarily FE [further education] college ... there's no clear divide of the two. So, you know, some days you'll be spoon fed everything like ... an A-level student ... and then other days, from the same person, you'll be told that 'Oh, we don't offer any assistance – it's all independent study'. There's no constant with it. (Charlie, 24-year-old male college student)

> When you're a bit more of a mature student and you're trying to do something that's meant to create a pathway and create a future, it's very difficult to be sharing that building and sharing that space with people that are potentially ten years or more younger than you and they don't have the same motivation. (Chloe, 25-year-old female college graduate)

At the same time, there were benefits in having smaller cohort sizes and closer relationships with lecturers:

> It's quite a small course, it's quite good in the sense that, like, for example, I've had specific teachers that have been on the journey with us all the way through, which is nice because you're familiar with them and you feel as if you can maybe open up to them a little bit more as well. (Poppy, 26-year-old female college student)

Students later faced the challenge of how to present themselves and their higher education experience to those outside the college community. Naming the awarding university was an important consideration:

> I usually put [the university's name] ... I actually got into the habit of it more when I was applying for graduate schemes because a lot of them didn't give the option of [the college] as where you'd earned your degree from. (Phoebe, 21-year old female college graduate)

> I didn't even think of that to be honest. Originally until [now] I would've just put [the name of the college]. I'll probably put [the name of the college] and [the partner university] because they are linked – both one and the same thing. (Alexander, 22-year-old male college student)

> In the foundation degree, the [college] symbol was much more prominent [on the certificate], but in the end degree it's very equal and so it looks like a [partner university] degree ... we thought if it was going to be very college-related it might not be as professional ... that's one of the stigmas attached to doing anything at a college really. (Scarlett, 41-year-old female college graduate)

What 'success' meant to these students was not limited to obtaining a particular job or reaching a certain salary. Confidence and pride were important as well:

> If I've had meetings at work ... I didn't ever really want to speak ... I'd just sit in the corner and be quiet, but now I'm straight in there and I think I can actually back up what I'm saying now. (Isaac, 43-year-old male college student)

> I think as much as anything I've exceeded my expectations because ... my [school] reports used to say 'class clown' ... So that was what I used to be like and I think my most positive experience would be that I've actually you know I'm doing really well at this and it's sort of finally I'm doing something good. (Charlie, 25-year-old male college student)

Highlighted in these illustrative findings are features often underemphasised in quantitative studies. Even with work placements, the all-through nature of the university degree is a different experience from the staged progression offered in many colleges. Distinctions between full-time and part-time study do not fully capture college patterns of participation. Those studying for the college bachelor's degree are indeed a heterogeneous population.

Domestic debates, American echoes

Within government and its agencies, statistical and econometric evidence is a key source of policy intelligence. Assessments of the extent to which college degrees and diplomas might serve as 'a resource in the struggle for social justice' (Avis and Orr, 2016: 58) or a vehicle for 'upward social mobility' (Webb et al., 2017: 163) call on a broad range of evidence, including contextual and comparative data.

We identify three intersecting domestic debates that bear on these and related questions. They echo arguments in other college systems.

Problems of growth

The first debate has to do with system change in response to high participation. In a series of essays on British attitudes to growth in the middle of the 1980s, the American scholar Martin Trow (1981, 1989) commented on a reluctance or refusal to come to terms with diversity in higher education. He posed two scenarios for the transition to mass higher education in England (Trow, 1987).

One possibility involved abolition of the binary line, and the creation of a large new sector of degree granting universities and polytechnics. Given an unyielding commitment to high and uniform standards in the English system, one centred on the full-time bachelor's degree, Trow (1987) viewed the universities and polytechnics as both being part of a common system of elite higher education. Were the bulk of growth to be taken by the degree awarding system, he argued, the more its institutions would contend with a lower unit of funding, less autonomy and lower standards. Over time, it would become increasingly stratified and cause severe stresses and deep tensions.

In a second scenario, his preferred option, Trow (1987) saw more growth being taken by a network of further education colleges. Like American community colleges, they were relatively inexpensive, their courses were largely open to all, and their students were older and mostly part-time. Both types of institutions were strongly vocational, yet each offered academic programmes at a variety of levels. However, unlike their British counterparts, the community colleges were a genuine part of higher education, with articulation agreements enabling students to transfer with credit to four-year institutions.

The Trow commentary on English arrangements and their class relations touched many nerves (Parry, 2003b). Polytechnics had no wish to be reminded of their further education origins. Universities still had to come to terms with the rise of the polytechnics. As inscribed in the architecture of the 1992 two-sector settlement, the road chosen in England was closer to the first of the two options posed by

Trow (1987). For reasons anticipated by Trow, the near-complete separation of higher education from further education in the 1992 Act was unsustainable and was soon abandoned. The task for colleges thereafter was to present their remaining and new higher education, including their bachelor's provision, as a normal and necessary accompaniment to their further education.

Matters of mission

Subsequent government policies sought to reinstate higher education into the mission of further education colleges. The need to meet a 50 per cent participation target by 2010, followed by the quest for greater competition, brought the bachelor's degree back into the further education fold. Nevertheless, college higher education was positioned at one end of a steep hierarchy of institutions stratified by status, funding and perceived quality. Like the universities that set up mission groups in the 1990s, the largest higher education providers in the college sector formed themselves into the 'mixed economy group' (Mixed Economy Group, 2022).

The group, which remains active, dedicated itself in part to making the case to policymakers for colleges to be less reliant on universities for funding and validation. Degree awarding powers came more into view with the arrival of the foundation degree. For universities, their existing powers enabled them to award the new qualification. For colleges, it involved serious lobbying. Once foundation degree awarding powers had been achieved, the goal was full taught degree awarding powers, including for the bachelor's degree. For government, the target of its regulatory reform was private providers. Colleges were positioned in the slipstream.

The return of undergraduate education to the mission of the further education sector, together with the possibility of awarding powers, did not provoke a larger debate about the purpose of colleges. This was mainly because higher education was such a small percentage of the total provision in colleges. This was in contrast to the United States, where state authorisations to confer the bachelor's degree heralded, for some, a dilution of the long-standing structure and mission of the junior or community college. For these two-year institutions, the associate's degree was the capstone qualification. Still, there were worries in England that moves to create separate spaces and facilities for higher education within colleges might prefigure a two-tier provision, a 'them and us' organisational culture (Feather, 2011).

More of a concern, at least for later governments, was a weakening of the vocational mission of colleges. General further education colleges were the largest type of provider in the college sector. From the 1970s, they increasingly provided academic, vocational and basic education for young people and adults. Efforts by policymakers to assign or forge vocational specialisms for individual colleges met with little success. In pursuit of their social role, American community colleges were subject to similar 'dilemmas of comprehensiveness'. Attempts to make them more specialised were much resisted (Dougherty, 2009).

Already in the further education sector in England were specialist colleges in art and design, land-based subjects and the education of adults. Into the sector were transferred over one hundred sixth form colleges (previously under schools regulations and offering mainly A levels to young people aged 16 to 19). For observers, the diversity of the sector lent support to the suspicion that 'it had been to some extent thrown together' (Smithers and Robinson, 2000: 1). Notwithstanding its mixture of institutions, each with differing missions, the degrees and sub-bachelor qualifications taught in the sector retained their applied and workforce orientations.

Claims to distinctiveness

Arguments for the distinctiveness of degree and sub-degree education in college settings have been a major justification for its funding and its role in widening participation. As the body responsible for college higher education after incorporation, HEFCE (1995) pointed to a number of features held in common: a tradition of closeness to the world of work; a local and access orientation (serving geographically dispersed and educationally marginalised populations); a basis for progression; and a place for specialism.

Among course leaders, the source and essence of difference were expected to be found in 'the traditions, conditions and exchanges that characterised the teaching and learning context in colleges' (Parry et al., 2004: 16). A key dimension was the smaller size and greater intimacy of teaching and learning groups. In universities at this time, lecture sizes for full-time degree programmes routinely reached a

hundred or more. The typical class size in colleges rarely exceeded 20. If it did, it was likely to be split. Highly prized was the 'personal pedagogy' offered to students, especially the accessibility and support of tutors.

Cutting across these features were the costs of operating at these scales, the narrowness of the curriculum choices available to students and, in some cases, the extent of intellectual challenge within a small student population (Parry et al., 2004). Rather than examples of upward academic drift, the college undergraduate degree was for some another version of turning higher education into further education (Ainley, 2016).

Narratives of distinctiveness coincided with concerns in some quarters about small and isolated pockets of provision in colleges, especially where bachelor-level provision was contemplated. The merit of cultivating an ethos or culture of a 'higher' education was explored and criticised. Like appeals to 'critical mass' in degree provision, claims to distinctiveness were often elusive. More specifically, there were close parallels between what was claimed to be distinctive about college higher education and the direction of travel witnessed across the wider higher education landscape (Parry et al., 2004: 3). Nevertheless, there were important aspects of what college higher education offered; for example, alignments with widening participation were central and critical (Bathmaker, 2016). Institutional differentiation and educational distinctiveness were combined in calls in some circles for the reintroduction of the 'polytechnic' title for colleges gaining degree awarding powers.

Issues for policy and research

Such debates are expected to sharpen as policies geared to making markets in higher education confront interventions aimed at steering demand away from the bachelor's degree. With awarding powers now within reach of more colleges, the first steps are being taken by government to implement its skills plan for tertiary education in England (BIS and DfE , 2016).

This is a plan for the long term. Central to the reform is a two-type structure based on a distinction between 'technical' and 'academic' education, the former drawing its purpose 'from the workplace rather than an academic discipline', with its design driven by the needs of employers (Sainsbury et al., 2016: 24). The proposals for academic and technical pathways in the 2016 skills plan were amplified in a subsequent review of institutional structures and finance systems in further, higher and apprenticeship education (DfE , 2019). However, the implications for the college-taught bachelor's degree remain unclear (DfE , 2022).

Plainly, the domestic agenda for research is likely to be much influenced by the dynamics of this reform and its counter movements. Organisational behaviours will invite close investigation, especially where colleges have a stake in both undergraduate and higher technical education. Hitherto, research into college degrees and college awarding powers has been slim. It is a gap to be closed if changes in the college system are to be properly understood and, equally, if evidence and argument from England is to play into international and comparative studies.

Notwithstanding the small research base, there are important reasons to bring cross-national perspectives to bear on future work about the English college sector as a whole. On the home international front, college higher education is currently positioned differently in the tertiary systems of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In each territory, the presence or near-absence of the bachelor's degree in further education colleges is a legacy of planned arrangements, quasi-markets or combinations of both. As in England, the governments in Scotland and Wales have recently completed reviews of their further and higher education systems (Hazelkorn, 2016; SFC , 2021). The future of the bachelor's degree in their college sectors will be of interest to both researchers and policymakers.

From a wider international perspective, studies and comparisons of the bachelor's degree, and of college higher education more generally, in near-neighbour college systems offer additional lenses through which to view developments in England. Conceptually and empirically, they are also a source of key high-level research questions. For example, looking to Australia, Hodge et al. (2022) explore the influence of 'structures and traditions' on the development of college higher education, and how the resulting challenges affect the potential contributions of this provision to society and the economy. With a focus on Canada, Skolnik (2022) asks who makes the call as to whether a particular education offer is at the higher education level. Taking Australia, Canada, the United States of America and the United Kingdom into consideration, Wheelahan (2022) questions why countries with liberal market economies have not seen the rapid levels of growth in their college higher education and degree programmes which

some had expected. In the case of the college-taught bachelor's degree in England, these are only a few of the questions to be fully explored with historical, quantitative, qualitative and comparative evidence.

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

For the study by Allen (2016) detailed in the qualitative section of this article, ethical approval was granted by the Central University Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford. Further details are available in Allen (2016).

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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