Higher Education and Colleges:
A comparison between England and the USA

Madeleine King, John Widdowson and Richard Brown
The Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE)

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The Mixed Economy Group

The Mixed Economy Group of colleges (“MEG”) comprises those colleges of Further Education which offer a significant amount of Higher Education as part of their overall curriculum provision. That provision ranges from Honours Degrees to Higher National awards, Foundation Degrees and professional qualifications. Member colleges focus on the complementary aims of widening participation amongst groups and individuals currently underrepresented in Higher Education and working with employers to ensure that higher level skills are developed and recognised in the workplace.
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# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreword</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Background</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Context</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Current Issues</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The Role of US Colleges</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Transfer to HE from the Community College system</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Challenges within the Credit System</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Workforce Development in the US</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Helping US employees up-skill</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Community College Responsiveness.</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Strengths and Weaknesses</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Widening Participation and Student support</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. The Role of English Colleges</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Competition</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Widening Participation</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. The Importance of Credit Frameworks</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Foundation and Associate Degrees</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. The Scottish Experience</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. A Vision for Higher Education in Colleges</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. The Way Forward</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Discussion Points</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Conclusions</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Foreword

In this report we compare the roles of English Further Education Colleges and US Community Colleges in developing learners to acquire higher-level skills. We have a particular emphasis on those who are already in work and who come from groups under-represented in Higher Education. Our aim is to consider whether, and if so how, the experiences of US Community Colleges might inform the evolution of our (English) College sector.

There are dangers in this approach since both sets of Colleges arose in different circumstances and operate in different cultures. We have tried to understand these differences with the help of colleagues from the Association of American Community Colleges (AACC). In this report, we have drawn on information gained through discussions with senior staff in four New York State Community Colleges and the views of the members of the Mixed Economy Group (MEG) of colleges in England. MEG represents the 29 general Further Education (FE) Colleges which also offer a significant amount of higher education and as such are perhaps the closest comparator bodies to the Community Colleges. In the US, the Spellings Review of Higher Education has provoked a series of discussions about the purpose, quality and value for money of HE, and its relationship to the nation’s economic position. This debate clearly parallels discussions in the UK and offers some insights into how we might use the experience within our colleges to address the economic challenges posed by Leitch and the social justice issues raised by bodies such as the Sutton Trust.

Our work has been informed by:

- a background paper prepared for us by Professor Gareth Parry on Further Education Colleges and Higher Level Skills and Qualifications in England. The paper underpins our report and can be found on the CIHE website;
- four background papers prepared by US colleagues at the request of the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC). These papers are available on the CIHE website;
- corresponding papers prepared by Madeleine King and John Widdowson in their respective capacities as Coordinator and Chair of the Mixed Economy Group of UK Colleges. These in turn were informed by responses from MEG member colleges. Again, these papers are on the CIHE website;
- a seminar held in New York in late February 2008 chaired jointly by George Boggs (the Chief Executive of the AACC) and Richard Brown (Chief Executive of the CIHE);
- discussions with senior staff in four Community Colleges in New York State.

We are most grateful for all the work that underpins this review. However, the views we offer are our own and we take responsibilities for any misrepresentations. Since this paper aims to inform policy, we would welcome feedback and further suggestions on the issues, on the draft vision we have offered and on the way forward.

Richard A Brown
Chief Executive, CIHE

Madeleine King
Coordinator, MEG.

John Widdowson
Chair, MEG.
Higher education systems have major roles to play in reaching out to new and different markets. New learners might be young or old, in work or unemployed and in all organisations be they public, private or not-for-profit. Within the UK and US this system of higher-level learning embraces universities, colleges, private sector providers and in-house training provision. Colleges have a particularly important role to play. On both sides of the Atlantic they have a history of:

- engaging learners from non-traditional backgrounds
- encouraging and facilitating progression into universities, often in their locality
- working closely with local employers and especially small businesses to meet their learning needs for higher-level skills.

In the UK as in the US the College sector may be better equipped than universities to reach those from disadvantaged and non-traditional backgrounds. They have a local focus and have close links with area schools and employers. Their students may be either first-time higher education students from schools or adults already in employment who are either receiving or may be attracted by the idea of receiving work based learning for career development.

Some universities have little experience of skills development and enhancement of the existing workforce, particularly in the workplace. While some are developing their presence in this market with substantial pump-priming funds from HEFCE as part of being even more employer facing, for many others this new market with its uncertain and volatile demand and largely untried funding models will probably remain marginal business. They will continue to focus on the market for traditional full time long courses, delivered in institutions to known learners at more predictable prices, a familiar environment that they know well and which best fits their strengths.

Short-term initiative funding from HEFCE is certainly helping Higher Education Insitutions (HEIs) develop a range of pilots and to grow the market for work based learning. However, the sector needs a more sustainable approach based on clearer ideas of long-term business commitment.

2. Context

The great expansion of English higher education from the mid-1980s was initially driven by business demand for graduates and to a lesser extent post-graduates. In expanding the supply of places available, the government in turn released a previously suppressed demand for HE that broadened University access to a wider body of students. Demand remains robust as evidenced by the continuing high wage premium for graduates from a wide range of disciplines – but especially in STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) subjects and despite some complaints about weaknesses in the employability skills of some graduates. This expansion was built on a traditional model of learning and delivery - largely long courses of three or four years full time study funded accordingly and delivered in institutions by research-oriented academics. The quality assurance model was appropriate to institution-based delivery against these well-established academic norms. The expansion did not break the mould. Equally it was only “mass” to the extent that at that point it predominantly addressed first-time learners. Those in the workforce who had missed out on higher education remained largely untouched unless they embarked on a part-time course at the Open University or one of the few other universities that offered part-time degree study or either a professional qualification or HNC/D. The expansion also failed to recognise the value of the HE experience, in that if an individual did not complete the long course embarked upon he or she was branded as having ‘failed’. This perception remains the same today.

A deepening crisis of funding brought the earlier expansion to an abrupt halt in the middle of the 1990s. Perhaps in contrast, by this time the steady growth of HNC/D provision in colleges had enabled adults in employment to access work related HE qualifications locally. For many
Higher Education and Colleges: a comparison between England and the USA

this gave them an opportunity to progress to senior management positions in sectors such as construction or finance.

Both the decline in the unit of resource for undergraduate teaching and the refusal of the Treasury to continue to underwrite the costs of student support exposed the unfitness of this funding approach to delivering mass higher education. The path was set for funding to incorporate an element of cost-sharing combined with a search for lower-cost delivery options such as short-cycle and/or work-based learning. For higher level learning in England1, students and employers are now expected to make a greater contribution to the costs of provision.

3. Current Issues

If England is to make the next leap and increase the percentage of those in the work force who have higher level skills from around 29% to over 40%, as recommended by Leitch in the Review of Skills (2006)2 then:

- new models of provision, delivery, funding and quality assurance will be needed;
- we will have to redefine what we mean by “higher level learning” (coupled with a robust discussion involving employers as well as academics as to what we mean by higher level skills and how these relate to traditional definitions of knowledge and academic skills);
- all providers will need to be more engaged through closer partnerships where each play to their strengths in a more coherent system-wide approach;
- FE Colleges must be enabled to realise their potential to play a more significant local and business facing role. That role must be recognised and supported by HEIs.

The recent consultation document produced by DIUS, “Higher Education at Work – High Skills: High Value”3 reflects these issues and seeks recommendations. This report explores these themes, informed in particular by information gathered from US Community Colleges. It then sets a suggested Vision for the provision of higher education in Colleges in the UK with some suggestions about the changes in policy and practice needed to make that vision a reality.

4. The Role of US Colleges

Unlike English colleges which also deliver higher education, the Community Colleges are considered to be part of the American HE system. They have played a major role in enabling the country to achieve its current position where over 50% of the workforce has some higher education. There are 1,200 colleges, the majority of which are public sector. The average age of their students is 29, with nearly 60% of all learners being enrolled part-time4. They arose as feeder institutions to universities but their roots go back to the underlying American belief in the importance of universal learning. Thomas Jefferson wrote in January 1789:

“Whenever the people are well informed, they can be trusted with their own Government; that, whenever things get so far wrong as to attract their notice, they may be relied on to set them to rights”5. He is also attributed with saying that: “Education should be practical as well as liberal and should serve the public good as well as individual needs.”

Some 35% of all Community College students in the US are from ethnic minorities6. In a diverse multicultural society with high numbers of immigrants from around the world, the Community Colleges have always offered a liberal arts component. This has had the overt aim of facilitating social inclusion, integration and cohesion as an essential part of the process of creating new citizens. At a time when integration into the American way of life is important this role remains

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1 This report focuses on English colleges, though there is a short section on Scottish colleges later
2 www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/leitch
3 DIUS, 14 April 2008
4 American Association of Community Colleges; Facts 2008
5 Quoted in one of the four papers from the AACC: Workforce Development; Philip Ringle, see CIHE website
6 AACC; Facts 2008
core to all Colleges. In effect it is a “national curriculum”. This liberal arts component is proving of increased relevance as employers place renewed emphasis on the generic competencies appropriate to a fast moving work place where team working, customer facing skills and the ability to learn for oneself is at least as important as technical knowledge7. In England, the focus on qualifications and skills favoured by government policy may sometimes override the purely personal development role of education although the role of enhanced vocational skills should not be underestimated in building personal confidence.

It is these broader skills that are the basis for the two year Associate Degree. From this base, students can build vocational capabilities or progress to universities to add the further two years that will give them a Bachelors Degree, often in a specific subject. “Situated as they are between high schools and four year colleges, community colleges are at the crossroads of social mobility in American society.”

From our discussions with staff in New York Community Colleges, we concluded that a prime concern was to draw local residents in to the learning process, with the express purpose of enabling them to remain economically active. This was closely linked to ensuring that they could progress up a career ladder, at a pace of their choosing, and to promote social inclusion and mobility. We were repeatedly told that establishing links and progression pathways was part of the role of the teacher and there were few if any qualifications which were genuinely terminal in nature, with no progression pathway to any higher qualification. College Presidents were clear that whilst economic regeneration and employer engagement did not drive the college curriculum, they did shape the relationship between themselves and their local communities.

5. Transfer to HE from the Community College System

The ease with which this transition is made depends largely on the articulation agreement that exists within each State system – there is little articulation between States – eight States, including California, Florida and Maryland have passed legislation to ensure common course numbers. Systems of credit recognition support the articulation and the whole process is underpinned by legislation9. Equally many transfer before completing a degree, many “stop-out” for family or financial reasons and resume their education at a later time. The traditional pattern of linear transfer from a two year college to a four year university programme is no longer the norm. A much more flexible pattern is prevalent, supported by credit and funding systems which in turn make higher education more accessible. In comparison, such ‘stop-outs’ are seen as ‘drop outs’ in England, reflecting failing students and institutions.

Students use a variety of transfer mechanisms such as early transfer, transfer via a “swirling pattern” across colleges and universities, transfer from school with college credits, use of college courses studied during the vacation at a university, use of credits acquired concurrently while at university and college with joint studies incorporated into the university curriculum10. Finally there are new virtual approaches to the acquisition of credits in response to demands for on-line or blended learning. This flexibility again contrasts with the more rigid approaches in England and suggests we have a long way to go to develop a truly holistic approach to higher level learning.

7 See Will Archer and Jess Davidson, ’Graduate Employability: what do employers think and want?’, CIHE, March 2008
9 Even so it is easier to secure progression from a Community College to say a university in the California State System than to one of the campuses of the research led University of California.
10 See the paper by Desna Wallin, ‘The Transfer Function’, on CIHE website
Credit and funding by credit lies at the heart of progression in the US. It is also the vital component underlying the majority of higher education programmes delivered by Community Colleges. While there are just over half a million learners undertaking an Associate Degree in any year, there are 6 million on credit bearing courses. It is this credit learning core that underpins the ability of Community Colleges to go out and be enterprising, flexible and seek the more volatile and uncertain work from local businesses and residents. It also attracts learners by offering short, accessible or subsidised first bites of study.

However, we do not want to underestimate the complexity of the different approaches adopted in different States. Some commentators note the Byzantine structure of some transfer systems and how this can disadvantage those from non-traditional backgrounds who could probably benefit most. This is particularly true in vocational and technical areas. Despite the good practice on articulation in some States noted above, one AACC colleague concluded that "most states resort to a hotch-podge of individual case by case and often course by course agreements between a single community college and a single four-year institution". One of our college contacts explained to us that her college insisted that any four year school considering an articulation agreement with her college must accept their students on completion of their degree, not course completion. This avoided the situation whereby the receiving institution subjected each transfer student to a course-by-course analysis on application.

Discussions about transfer with senior staff in New York drew useful parallels with the experience of MEG members. The progression of Foundation Degree students to a final Honours year is generally a planned process, with the college having ensured that study skills and any additional top-up modules are built into the Foundation Degree course. In some cases, tutors from the receiving HEI teach some sessions at the college as a precursor to the students transferring to the University. In the main, the expectations of the receiving HEI are built into the Foundation Degree, rather than addressed in the summer term of transfer. In New York a similar exercise was undertaken, with most colleges having specific teams of staff whose purpose was to ensure that particular Associate Degrees could be mapped to a number of Bachelors programmes in a number of Universities. Additionally, individual tutors regarded it as part of their job to ensure that their students took meaningful combinations of subjects, i.e., they did not limit their future study or career options by too narrow or too diverse a range of subjects. The greater problem lay in the design of Associate Degrees for employers: often the validating body took the view that the subject matter could not easily be raised to degree standard and the process of course design could often take a year or more. In the meantime, the employer's needs could have changed. Whilst most colleges had employer representation on their subject advisory boards, the employers did not have a determining voice in curriculum content or design. Their technical advice was usually followed, however. Within colleges, not all staff were enthusiastic about tailoring the college offer to meet economic need, with many seeing a distinction between teaching and training, education and skill delivery.

Within New York, staff in Community Colleges went to some lengths to ensure that there was sufficient articulation between Certificate, Associate and Bachelors courses that progression was possible from one to the other, albeit not necessarily through immediate linear progression. As in California, New York residents are aware of the link between higher level skills and a higher standard of living, leading them to be prepared to pay for training which will have a direct impact on their employability. They also accept lifelong learning as a matter of course: this is a key distinction between the two systems and something that has yet to be addressed in the discussions over the implementation of the Leitch proposals in England. However, Colleges in both countries face a similar problem of employer reluctance to pay a commercial rate for their employees' training.

Previous CIHE research suggested that in California more students now go back to Community College to get a vocationally relevant award than transfer to a four year institution. In New

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11 Desna Wallin op cit
12 See Connor and King Community Colleges: the California Experience, CIHE 2006
York State, which provided the basis for much of this paper, it was not unusual for those with a Bachelors degree to return to their local Community College to acquire a vocational Certificate or attend classes which gave them greater practical skills. These were often available through ‘Weekend College’ arrangements, enabling the student to continue to earn during the week whilst gaining a work-related qualification.

7. Workforce Development in the US

In the US, workforce development is the responsibility of the local Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs) formed as a result of the Workforce Investment Act. The purpose of the Act is to:

“...increase the employment, retention, and earnings of participants, and increase occupa-
tional skill attainment by participants, and, as a result improve the quality of the workforce, re-
duce welfare dependency, and enhance the productivity and competitiveness of the nation.”

Membership of these local Boards include representatives from the local Community Colleges as well as private training providers. Nationwide, the Boards have identified the most significant skills gap to be in occupations that require more than high school qualifications but less than a four year degree. This is causing an ever increasing number of people to turn to Community Colleges. A 37% increase is needed in the numbers of workers possessing a Bachelor or Associate degree by 2025. The demographic shifts in both the US and UK only reinforce the need for increased skills at all ages. “Where a college degree was once a sign of privilege, it’s now all but a prerequisite for opportunity.”

The New York Workforce Investment Board notes that impending retirements in the “Baby Boomer” generation mean that those currently aged 10-19 will need to retrain and up-skill several times in order to replace and update existing expertise, and that a potential shortage of teachers, lecturers and instructors would jeopardise this process. Some 28% of New York state inhabitants are foreign born, and of these just over 50% have only a High School diploma or less. In New York City, nearly half of the residents are recent immigrants, many with a similar lack of basic skills. The relentless decline in the state’s manufacturing basis and its slower replacement with a service/high technology driven economy is of concern to the Board, which is aware that education, and the acquisition of higher level skills, is the only way forward for the economy.

The Community Colleges are able to respond because they have the advantage of being numerous, well-connected on vocational learning and closely engaged with local businesses and their communities. They are able to offer “smaller class sizes, faculty dedicated primarily to teaching and lower cost.” This description also reflects the situation in English Further Education Colleges.

8. Helping US employees up-skill

An emphasis on local provision to meet local business need has helped differentiate the Community College from other segments of the higher education system. The range of work-based learning provision, for example, covers core competencies including ‘soft skills,’ customised job training for industry-wide needs, short intensive courses and training for local businesses or the region as a whole, hands-on training in computing, advanced manufacturing, and the latest technologies and continuous retraining and up-skilling across the economy. Many UK colleges have the same range of offerings and expertise. The challenge is also the same as identified by the Leitch report in the UK:

14 Ringle op cit
“As of 2006, nearly half of all adults over the age of 26 – approximately 90 million Americans – had no more than a high school diploma or General Education Diplomas (GED). Yet 65% of the country’s fastest growing occupations require post-secondary education”15

The parallel with the UK is striking.

The New York Workforce Investment Board pledges the following actions in order to “create a workforce system that works for everyone”:

- Design a system with “no wrong doors”
- Eliminate bureaucratic barriers to assisting employers and providing people with critical skills
- Provide incentives for career ladders and lattices
- Develop a system with real time labour market information
- Detail occupations with looming demographic challenges
- Identify and apply common measures across all workforce programmes that focus on outcomes that matter
- Ensure all New Yorkers, regardless of employment barrier, are afforded the opportunity to engage in employment16

9. Community College Responsiveness

The range of occupational programmes in part reflect the responses of Colleges to business demand and partly the initiatives of College staff who go out pro-actively to market their institution from a secure business base of credit funding and Associate Degrees. If technology change has been the driver from businesses, per capita State funding has been another driver. Community Colleges are essentially local institutions serving local needs. They are often funded from a mixture of local as well as State sources and whilst most communities value education per se, most residents also expect to see evidence that their tax dollars have been used effectively and to their local benefit. This business responsive provision is also free from funding and quality constraints since it is the customer who is the judge of value and quality.

Customers will either pay and return for more (or not) depending on what is provided. These questions of transparency and value for money formed part of the Spellings review of HE. The College Presidents that we spoke to all quoted the current shortage of nurses as an example of how colleges help health service providers address a long term need. Most health providers had calculated that the cost of recruiting a nurse from the Philippines was about $12,000 per year. It would be far cheaper and in the interests of both nations for the colleges and local health services to come to a training agreement that saw existing staff being up-skilled or new college students enrolled on high-quality long-term nurse training schemes. In other areas, notably where there has been a shortage of teacher training or where access to university provision was difficult, the Community Colleges have been funded to deliver four-year Bachelors degrees. While some see this as dangerous mission drift, others see it as a natural progression and flexible response to local needs.

There is also considerable flexibility around staffing and staff contracts in this business facing work. This provision can, for example, be offered through separate businesses - such as the establishment of new College companies.

15 Aissid 2007 quoted by Ringle op cit
10. Strengths and Weaknesses

(a) Flexibility of the system

The aforementioned examples support a view that the US Community College curriculum framework could be considered akin to an empty shell which can be filled with a range of changing offers. This can be delivered: in an institution; partly in the workplace; partly liberal arts based; partly credit bearing and partly flexible, responsive and even entrepreneurial selling an unarticulated need. Some of the latter has been part-justified on the basis of it being a form of R&D, testing the market for what might then become more mainstream and core credit bearing. Nonetheless, the core remains the credit bearing courses and Associate Degrees that provide the bedrock funding on which the various and varying business focused provision can be built.

The Community Colleges are able to respond because they have the advantage of “smaller class sizes, faculty dedicated primarily to teaching and lower cost”. They offer occupational degrees as Associate Degrees in a wide range of subjects with about one third in liberal arts or general studies while another 25% are in health professions and another 25% in business professions. Each seeks to help students understand the importance and application of technology.

Certificate programmes are another type of education programme; lasting less than two years they are designed to meet specific occupational standards developed with industry. Some, however, do attract credit, so are not purely free-standing terminal qualifications.

Community Colleges have developed programmes through partnerships with local unions in apprenticeships through on-site or in-college provision, assistance in identifying skill needs, short cycle development programmes, contracted training, adult education and a range of non-credit bearing offerings. AACC colleagues noted that Community Colleges can play a central role in local economic development not only in the ways described above but also in attracting new businesses and working with them to build skills capacity in the area in tandem with business needs. “Practical and pragmatic” seem to be a hallmark of Community Colleges. Whilst praising the Community Colleges for their role in meeting the demand for higher level education and training, the recent review of HE in the US raises a number of questions about these local arrangements. We refer to these below.

(b) The Spellings Review

The review of Higher Education in the US commissioned by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings was published in September 2006 and has understandably been the subject of much discussion within the American education community. Reference is made to it here as it highlights a number of similar concerns to those faced by the English pre- and post-16 system. Despite the greater flexibility offered by the US credit arrangements and the Community College admissions systems, these arrangements are clearly no more perfect than our own. It may be helpful to look briefly at the outcome of the Spellings Review and to compare the solutions proposed to problems that have arisen on both sides of the Atlantic. The Spellings analysis may also have some impact on the English government’s wish to see the implementation of a nationwide credit system and a more flexible approach to the delivery of HE.

17 Ringle ob cit
18 Our earlier report on Community Colleges by Augi Gallego gave an example of this in the growth of the bio-medical industry around San Diego. Community Colleges - the US experience, CIHE, September 2003
19 A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of US Higher Education; September 2006
In her report, Secretary Spellings was blunt about the challenges facing an education system that was once deemed to be one of the best in the world, but which was now falling behind that of a number of other countries. The purpose of the review was to “consider how best to improve our system of higher education to ensure that our graduates are well prepared to meet our future workforce needs and are able to participate fully in the changing economy.”

The Commission found several fundamental weaknesses in the existing system, broadly headlined as access, affordability, accountability, and quality. With regard to the latter her commissioners commented:

“Accreditation, the large and complex public-private system of federal, state and private regulators, has significant shortcomings. Accreditation agencies play a gatekeeper role in determining the eligibility of institutions and programmes to receive federal and state grants and loans. The growing public demand for increased accountability, quality and transparency coupled with the changing structure and globalisation of higher education requires a transformation of accreditation.”

In practice, a large part of the problem concerning accreditation is the language used in accreditation reports, which is not easily understood by the public. The reports of public institutions are in the public domain once they have been shared by the College Board of Trustees, but the perception remains that this area of quality control is opaque to those outside the world of education. Similar comments have been made by English employers and employees, in so far as the language of academia can sound particularly convoluted to those not regularly involved in the education sector.

A specific recommendation from the Commission was that:

America must ensure that our citizens have access to high quality and affordable educational, learning and training opportunities throughout their lives. We recommend the development of a national strategy for lifelong learning that helps all citizens understand the importance of preparing for and participating in higher education throughout their lives.

The commission encourages institutions to expand their reach to adults through technology such as distance learning, workplace learning, and alternative scheduling programmes.

The secretary of education, in partnership with states and other federal agencies, should develop a national strategy that would result in better and more flexible learning opportunities, especially for adult learners. The comprehensive plan should include better integration of policy, funding and accountability between post secondary education, adult education, vocational education, and workforce development and training programmes.

Emphasis should be placed on innovation incentives, development of tailored, new delivery mechanisms, ability to transfer credits among institutions easily (subject to rigorous standards designed to ensure educational quality), and the ability to acquire credits linked to skill certifications that could lead to a degree.

The plan should include specific recommendations for legislative and regulatory changes needed to create an efficient, transparent and cost-effective system needed to enhance student mobility and meet U.S. workforce needs.

These proposals reflect our own development of Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) Initiated in 2004 as a means of improving the progression routes available to those with vocational qualifications, these received short-term funding from HEFCE which is unlikely to continue
beyond 2009. The links between LLNs and other existing (and often similar initiatives) are sometimes unclear.

The Commission’s findings were echoed in a number of parallel analyses conducted by other national bodies at about the same time. Despite this, it would be fair to say that there has been a degree of resistance to some of the recommendations from both education and employer interests, with the result that any changes will be slower-paced than the Secretary of Education would wish. These reflect the strength and the weakness of the US system: whilst it enables local communities to make local decisions rapidly, it risks losing sight of quality issues, transparency can be diminished and individual interests can overtake those of the wider good. There is also scepticism amongst some academics about the role of business in influencing the teaching (and research) agenda of higher education institutions.

The impact of the Spellings review has so far been limited to action to look at student finance schemes, better ways to measure the performance of individual universities and the links between secondary schools and Community Colleges. The Commissioners expressed concern at the literacy and numeracy skills of pupils transferring to the college system. Plans to enable the public to compare the performance of universities from a value-for-money perspective continue to meet with resistance\(^\text{20}\).

### 11. Widening Participation and Student support: a comparison between the college systems

In their review of the US Higher Education system, members of the Spellings Commission noted that:

Access and achievement gaps disproportionately affect low-income and minority students. Historically these are the very students who have faced the greatest academic and financial challenges in getting access to or completing college. Many will be the first in their families to attend college. Regardless of age, most will work close to full-time while they are in college and attend school close to home. Despite years of funding student aid programs, family income and the quality of high school education remain major factors in college-level access and success.

By age 25–29, about 34 of every 100 Whites obtain bachelor’s degrees, compared to 17 of every 100 Blacks and just 11 of every 100 Hispanics. Just as dismaying, low-income high school graduates in the top quartile on standardized tests attend college at the same rate as high-income high school graduates in the bottom quartile on the same tests. Only 36 percent of college-qualified low-income students complete bachelor’s degrees within eight and a half years, compared with 81 percent of high-income students.

Access problems also affect adult students. More and more adults are looking for ways to upgrade and expand their skills in an effort to improve or protect their economic position. Nearly 40 percent of today’s postsecondary students are self-supporting adults aged 24 and up; almost half attend school part-time; more than one-third work full-time; 27 percent have children themselves. In 2005, more than 12 million adults aged 25 and older participated in credential programmes in colleges and universities.

But we are not expanding capacity across higher education to meet this demand. America’s Community Colleges, whose enrollments have been growing significantly, have provided a place to begin for many of these

\(^{20}\) Comparative frameworks are however being developed including for benchmarking purposes and the CIHE is working with Standard & Poor’s on an approach comparing US and UK systems and selected institutions.
Higher Education and Colleges: a comparison between England and the USA

There is a need for many institutions to move from being teaching-centred to becoming learner-centred

Students. In some States, however, Community Colleges are reaching their capacity limits, a cause for deep concern.

Shortcomings in high schools mean that an unacceptable number of college students must take costly remedial classes. According to the most recent National Assessment of Adult Literacy, the percentage of college graduates deemed proficient in prose and literacy has actually declined from 40 to 31 percent in the past decade. These shortcomings have real-world consequences. Employers report repeatedly that many new graduates they hire are not prepared to work, lacking the critical thinking, writing and problem-solving skills needed in today's workplaces. In addition, business and government leaders have repeatedly and urgently called for workers at all stages of life to continually upgrade their academic and practical skills.

These comments reflect current English concerns. The Sutton Trust and Government Ministers have all raised concerns about the lack of progress made towards breaking down the social class structure of higher education. Despite initiatives such as Aimhigher and Access Agreements, the uptake of higher education from the lower socio-economic groups has actually fallen over the past four years. Both nations have focused on student finance as the key to ensuring access, but in both nations more will need to be done to resolve a growing inequality of opportunity. Employability remains an issue in both countries, as does the perceived value of an HE qualification amongst some learners, particularly if accompanied by debt.

(a) Learning support

One AACC colleague raised the need for many institutions to move from being teaching-centred to becoming learner-centred. This change is crucial to reaching and integrating disadvantaged learners, with more personalised academic and student support services incorporated into student learning plans. Comprehensive assessments of attitudes and study skill needs should also be part of the organisational culture. Along with this goes a rethink of the classroom and the campus including the curriculum, the support services and the nature of customised provision within a pluralistic framework. There is a view that this positions the Community College as but one player in a linked network of providers and support organisations.

In a setting where the need for "remedial" support such as additional Maths, English, essay writing or second language support was not deemed unusual we found a reluctance to adapt teaching structures to learners unexpected. One of our college contacts in New York stressed that all new entrants were automatically assessed for their level of English and Maths proficiency, with the prime purpose of making sure that students had acquired the academic skills that they needed before they had taken too many courses for which they lacked the basic competencies needed to succeed. However, whilst many colleges were able to provide good facilities for all learners, regardless of any learning difficulties or disabilities, we were left with the impression that the student was broadly expected to fit the college offer, with little leeway in terms of teaching and learning styles.

The parallel survey of MEG members revealed that additional student learning support was well-established within MEG member colleges. Most had good systems in place for students with recognised learning difficulties and disabilities or second-language needs who were already in receipt of additional support prior to college entry. New students who presented with hitherto undiagnosed learning needs were also given support through a system of discrete teams and personal tutors. There was a sense that as students and society generally became more comfortable about acknowledging learning difficulties or a disability at any age, so the demand for such support was likely to increase. In some cases, the FE College was working with its partner HEI to share staff development in this area but in the majority of cases the two institutions worked in isolation.

21 Recent changes in intergenerational mobility in the UK: Dec 2007.
22 Irving McPhail Running Ahead: Integrating disadvantaged students academically and socially into Community Colleges
Unlike the US, UK students of all ages appear reluctant to recognise the need for additional learning support in Maths, English, etc. in order to pursue degree-level study. Difficulties are experienced by mature entrants wishing to move from a Foundation Degree to an Honours year of study, especially where the Foundation Degree is mainly based on work place learning. In this setting, report writing skills are more necessary than essay writing abilities. This group of students were judged to need more pre-transfer support across a range of skills.  

(b) Careers Education and Guidance

The US College system seems able to offer a greater range of support and easier access to guidance specialists for students of all ages. Whilst some MEG member colleges have a team of professionally qualified guidance staff available to all students, in many cases the majority of careers education and guidance was offered by subject tutors or employers, with most of this input provided before the start of the course. Whilst this enabled a good initial course placement decision to be made, mid-course changes were more difficult and adult students facing a sudden change of circumstances were left relatively unsupported. In England, access to impartial guidance is made more difficult by the numbers of agencies involved, each of whom work with a particular age group. In New York we found that guidance was easily available, and to all students equally, either from professional guidance teams and/or transfer advice teams and/or One-Stop organisations. Built into a culture which promoted lifelong learning was the recognition of the need for easy access to impartial careers advice, in order to structure that learning. We noted that labour market information (LMI) was readily available. Although all college Presidents saw their main aim as being to educate those living in their local communities, the economic needs of the area were the main driver in their strategic thinking. Through the Workforce Investment Boards, good-quality LMI is freely available, and whilst LMI was a tool for strategic planning amongst college staff, it was also used as part of careers education and guidance sessions.

The New York Department for Labour has promoted the design and development of sector specific career ladders. Reminiscent of the sector Skills Agreements drawn up by English Sector Skills Councils, these are detailed maps of existing jobs, pathways and qualifications in particular sectors.

One of these completed projects involved the Aerospace/Defense Industry cluster in the Long Island region. Gathering detailed input from some 24 participating aerospace-defense companies, consultants created a database that allowed for the storage and analysis of information related to organisational structure, job descriptions, associated skill level requirements, educational requirements, wage rates/ranges for each job description, currently required training/certifications for each job description and potential career pathways within the industry. The information developed through this project was shared with the education and training community (K-12 school superintendents, universities, community colleges, proprietary training entities) and also became a main focus of local board led strategic planning efforts to align local workforce systems around key workforce issues in the Long Island region. New York State anticipates that this valuable career ladder development service will continue to expand as the needs of key industry sectors and emerging industries are incorporated into the Local Board-led strategic planning process in communities across the State. Local Boards have successfully used these career maps to help align workforce system services and policies, as well as influence curriculum development in the educational system and the types of training offerings available from service providers.
12. The Role of English Colleges

Within national and regional systems of post-secondary education, Colleges are confronted by competing opportunities and pressures. On the one side, global economies demand higher levels of education, training and skills from those of all ages and backgrounds, and Colleges respond by extending the range and reach of their vocational, academic and general programmes. On the other, modernising Governments use legislation and the market to promote greater diversity, responsiveness and distinctiveness among their tertiary institutions. Colleges are expected to distinguish their mission and profile from one another as well as from universities, schools and training organisations.

In the case of further education colleges in England, these movements find their expression in policy conditions that favour competition, specialisation and the reshaping of publicly-funded provision in line with national priorities. Among the nearly 400 colleges in the Further Education sector, some already have focused missions based on specific areas of activity or particular types of student or both. Around 100 ‘sixth form’ Colleges mainly provide full-time academic courses for young people intending to enter higher education. Another 40 or so Colleges are ‘specialist’ establishments and focus either on specific curriculum areas (such as art and design and land-based subjects) or cater mainly for adults (‘specialist’ designated institutions or ‘external institutions’).

The remainder – the majority at around 250 – are ‘general’ Further Education Colleges. These offer academic, vocationally oriented, occupationally specific and general education to young people and adults at a range of levels (from basic literacy and numeracy through to higher education) and in different modes and styles. There has been a move to encourage all colleges to specialise. Accordingly, general further education colleges have been pressed to cultivate a specialist – often vocational – identity and gain recognition as centres of vocational excellence. Most now have at least one vocational specialism for which they are regarded as a centre of excellence (CoVE) locally and regionally. A new and higher standard of accreditation is to be set replacing the CoVEs, involving a more direct role for employers and collaboration with national skills academies as part of this drive for specialisation.

Within this general FE group and the specialist institutions are the 29 ‘Mixed Economy Colleges’ that provide significant amounts of higher education. Although not recognised as a separate category, the scale of their higher level work is in contrast to the smaller amounts of higher education offered in most general further education colleges. The largest member of the mixed economy group (MEG) receives £8.4 million in direct funding from HEFCE and provides higher education learning to 2,500 students. By contrast, some colleges receive direct funding of less than £15k.

A recent report produced by the QAA concluded that the quality of HE provision in FE was excellent – 99% of judgments on the quality of learning opportunities were “commendable” or ‘approved’. The QAA report noted the vocational relevance of their curriculum and the commitment, support and accessibility of staff. This factor is crucial in moving forward the debate about widening participation and dealing with any residual misconceptions about the quality of HE learning offered in further education. Whilst only around 12% of HE learning is delivered in this setting, the quality of this almost entirely employer-facing provision is not in doubt. The expertise of the College sector, whilst acknowledged by Ministers, warrants further practical support by HEFCE and DIUS as both organisations attempt to resolve the challenges identified by the Leitch Review of Skills.
13. Competition

Not only do Colleges in the Further Education sector vary considerably in size, shape and character, they compete for students in two major markets: the education and training of the 16-19 population; and the teaching and training of adults. For every activity undertaken by Colleges, there is an alternative provider. School Sixth Forms, private training organisations and higher education establishments all offer courses in the same areas, although few match the spread of work found in most colleges. At the same time, FE colleges collaborate with schools to provide courses for 14-16 year-olds, with universities for the validation and teaching of higher education programmes, and with employers for work-based training.

Within in England, the Government appears to be encouraging a wider range of providers in the area of higher education to both develop their quality offerings and also play a greater role in delivering higher level learning that is specifically responsive to business demand.

The Government’s steps to open the market have been incremental, with no coherent statement of how all parties will work together and/or how tensions in existing legislation will be avoided. Whilst this is not incompatible with the aims of college self-regulation, it adds to uncertainty at a time when major changes are occurring within Government.

However, the Minister of State for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education has made clear his commitment to the role of Colleges as the main delivery agent of Foundation Degrees and the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills has specifically listed colleges as potential sites for new University Centres. Recent steps to engender a more demand responsive system include:

- encouraging colleges to be more entrepreneurial and responsive to demand by focusing on the role of Train to Gain Brokers who seek out providers who can meet the stated business demand for learning;
- seeking to ensure that those colleges that choose to engage with higher levels of learning have a sufficient critical mass of higher level learners to ensure consistent quality in the delivery of that learning; each college will be required to produce a strategy justifying the nature and extent of its distinctive involvement in higher education;
- enacting legislation to allow colleges to have Foundation Degree awarding powers (The Further Education and Training Act 2007);
- encouraging the piloting of two year ("compressed") degrees;
- relaxing the criteria for degree awarding powers so that the undertaking of research is no longer a requirement;
- enabling private sector providers (including for-profit organisations) to have degree awarding powers with the prospect that they might also be given university status in the future;
- as mentioned above, the recent proposal to establish university centres in some 20 cities and towns that currently do not have a university campus - including through building on existing college-based HE provision.

Despite broadening the numbers of potential providers of HE, the Government remains clear that Foundation Degrees will largely be provided by Colleges. Taken together, the passing of the Further Education and Skills Act, the HEFCE strategy for HE in FE and the focus on work-based learners by both the Aimhigher initiative and LLNs appear to reinforce the position of Colleges as local delivery points for higher education. However, there remains a gap between aspirations and the enabling framework on credit, funding and quality: a more networked system-wide approach is needed.

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24 For example, ACP 2006, UVAC 2007
25 DIUS, The New University Challenge, April 2008
14. Widening Participation

Colleges are key to widening participation in higher education on both sides of the Atlantic. At present in England, 48% of entrants to undergraduate education in HEIs come from the college sector. The majority of these (55%) come from general further education colleges compared to 40% from sixth form colleges and 6% from specialist colleges. Unlike entrants from sixth form colleges and from schools (state and private) who are nearly all under the age of 20, two out every five entrants from general further education colleges are adults (half of them aged 21 to 24 and the rest between 25 and 60). For many colleges, part-time or work-based students are an important or in some case the sole source of students.

General further education colleges also supply the highest number and proportion of entrants to full-time undergraduate courses at levels below the bachelor degree (the higher national diploma, foundation degree and diploma in higher education in particular). More students (mainly adults) from these colleges enter higher education institutions with their highest entry qualifications other than A-levels and more attend the newer universities, compared to those from sixth form colleges and schools.

In contrast with the more traditional view of the nature and purpose of higher education, the experience of MEG colleges suggests that college based learners may be more motivated by the prospect of a job or advancement in employment rather than the intrinsic value of study. They are older, many live at home and maintain existing family and community links. They have financial and social commitments. The student lifestyles which feature in some university marketing materials may have less appeal and in some cases provide a disincentive to higher-level study. When coupled with the difficulties of gaining acceptance with NVQs or full recognition of competency-based awards, these connotations of University undergraduates as primarily school leavers encourage work-based learners to turn to the more adult environment of their local College. Some may have used the college to obtain earlier qualifications and will therefore seek progression in a setting which offers familiar approaches, staff and subject material.

15. The Importance of Credit Frameworks

US Community Colleges have a clear focus on higher level learning and are seen as crucial players in an integrated higher education system. In England, the diffusion of roles within Colleges makes this more difficult. Different funding and quality regimes do not help. It has been noted that the most striking illustration of sector division between HEIs and Colleges is the failure to develop a single qualification and credit framework for English further and higher education. While there are regional consortia and the Government’s high level skills strategy places considerable emphasis on this system-wide approach, there is nothing equivalent to the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework. Each sector has its own architecture and nomenclature of levels;

26 Parry, op. cit.
27 The Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance which incorporates all universities, colleges and some other key players is particularly promising in being extensive and inclusive
Higher Education and Colleges: a comparison between England and the USA

and in neither has credit been fully adopted as a measure of transferable learning. While some universities, mainly post '92, do use and accept credit transfer, this is not generally the case with the pre- '92 universities. There is little here, and elsewhere, to compare with the currency of credit in the American system across diverse institutions and the amount of mobility afforded to (and taken by) its students as a result of the centrality of credit within individual State systems.

Lifelong Learning Networks were established with the main aim of constructing vocational pathways to higher education. In their short lives, they have gone some way to addressing this issue through the development of Progression Agreements (PAs). However, these are local arrangements which are often between one course at one College and one particular course at one University.

If we are serious as a nation about wishing to enable learners of all ages and backgrounds to develop higher level skills, to acquire learning when and where it suits them and to explore and progress around the 'climbing frame of learning', then systems of credit accumulation and transfer appear to be an essential component and must be made available across the country. Individuals need to be able to have the skills, knowledge and competences they have acquired in the workplace validated and credited. They should then be able to go on an in-house or external course whether provided by a private sector provider, a College or an HEI and build further credits.

The recent DIUS consultation document on Higher Level Skills draws attention to the need for nationwide credit arrangements by 2009-10.

New initiatives on a sub-regional basis such as the ModCAT initiative across learning providers in Manchester offer potential. In the Thames Gateway all of the HE and FE institutions have signed up to support a guarantee of progression for all with a Level 3 qualification. However, whilst these local initiatives are laudable, it could be argued that Government/HEFCE incentives are needed. The recent evaluation of Lifelong Learning Networks suggests that whilst the initiative has made a good start, firmer guidance is needed from HEFCE over a number of issues and the LLNs themselves must now tackle some of the more intractable issues concerning progression pathways, rather than concentrating on "easy wins". In many cases the Progression Agreements risk setting in stone the very distinction between the vocational and academic, and the pre- and post-92 HEIs that they were meant to blur. Despite recruiting a lot of their students from further education, many pre-92s keep FE Colleges at arms length for fear of "dumbing down" by association yet also regard the Colleges as competition rather than strategic collaborators. By contrast all of Hong Kong's top rated Universities have an FE College within their governance.

The moves under the Bologna Agreement to develop an EU wide European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) offer a way forward that international employers want to see implemented as soon as possible. All universities and colleges will want to consider how they might best work together to learn from the best practice in the US, implement ECTS and make credit frameworks central to their provision. However, this is an EU-driven proposal that is best regarded as work in parallel to UK policy moves. The key issue at the moment is for institutions and policy makers to value every step that learners take down a learning road and stop classifying those who 'stop out' as 'drop outs'.

16. Foundation and Associate Degrees

The Dearing Committee saw a distinct role for Colleges in expanding higher education:

"We are keen to see directly funded sub-degree higher education develop as a special mission for further education colleges".

28 It will be interesting to see if the Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance work on a sub-regional credit system succeeds where others have failed (GMSA in the Lifelong Learning Network for Greater Manchester)
29 There have been many attempts to implement such schemes; see e.g. the INCCA Report for the then DES in 1999-2000 chaired by Dr Geoffrey Copland and supported by the then Minister Tessa Blackstone
31 Professor Sir David Melville communication
32 NCIHE 1997
Higher Education and Colleges: a comparison between England and the USA

The Government initially accepted this recommendation. Indeed it consulted and then put in place a new two year higher award, the Foundation Degree. This was regarded as offering a framework that could re-work and possibly eventually replace the Higher National Certificate and Higher National Diploma, as their structures were felt to be incompatible with many of the newer growth sectors of the economy. The power to award the new degree rested with HEIs, and not FE Colleges.

When first announced, the Foundation Degree was described as akin to the American Associate Degree. It has however always tried to face in two directions. It is required to function as a transfer qualification (offering progression to the final stages of the bachelor degree) as well as a terminal qualification keyed to the needs of employers in specific occupational areas. The Foundation Degree is a narrower course of study which is vocationally specific unlike the Associate Degree, which contains a large liberal studies element even its most science-focused form. It has been designed by HE in collaboration with employers. The emphasis given to the transfer or the exit function of the Foundation Degree has varied. Universities have been more interested in this function and the preservation of their supply chain. Employers were always more interested in its role as a terminal award that would meet the skills gap at supervisory and higher technical level. The tensions inherent in this dual role became particularly evident when the Government announced that future HE expansion would be at Foundation Degree level. Those universities that saw themselves in the Foundation Degree market were naturally keen to preserve and expand their own offerings even at the expense of local Colleges. Currently around half of Foundation Degree graduates progress on to the final year of an Honours course.

High performing colleges with vocational specialisms and strengths at the appropriate levels should be at least as well-placed as business-facing universities to contribute to the growth and development of Foundation Degrees. Indeed, where Colleges have a particular vocational specialism, they may be the most appropriate provider with the credibility and understanding to develop such awards. Some learners may welcome the local nature of their College or do not want to be constrained by an academic year and timetable. They want flexible provision delivered to demand. Currently, 140 FE Colleges are directly funded by HEFCE to deliver higher education. The Government agrees that direct funding might be appropriate in some instances where niche provision is offered or where there are no obvious higher education partners (see reference to University Centres above). Understandably Colleges seeking additional funded numbers must also meet criteria including critical mass, their track record on quality and standards, and the nature of such provision. The Further Education and Training Act 2007 enables Colleges to award their own Foundation Degrees – despite opposition from the university sector. The QAA has a key role in this process and has already indicated that the quality of higher education provision offered by most FE Colleges is not in question.

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However, a combination of the current funding arrangements, unproven demand and uneven experience within the HE sector suggests that it may be difficult to stimulate the uptake of higher level work-based learning. Referring to the likely demand for higher-level skills, a report by the Higher Education Policy Institute noted that "it’s far from clear how much demand there will be for such provision". CIHE research has shown the limits of knowledge on employer demand while a forthcoming report concludes that employers have little engagement with universities because they are generally content with what they are getting from private sector providers. Despite encouragement through additional funding, the most business-facing Universities suggest that co-funded provision is unlikely to be more than 10% of their total student numbers. Against this background the relative success of FE Colleges in meeting employer demand bears more scrutiny. They would appear to have the necessary internal cultures and technical expertise to be able to deliver what is needed at Levels 3 and 4, with the potential to work in partnership with HEIs over Level 5 delivery.

33 This may be a reason why employer funding of FD students remains low according to HEFCE
34 Demand for Higher Education to 2020 and Beyond: June 2007
35 Workforce Development: how much engagement do employers have with HE; CIHE King March 2007
36 Helen Connar el al From Influence to Collaboration: Employer Engagement with Higher Education for Learning and Skills, CIHE forthcoming
Pending the acquisition of Foundation Degree Awarding Powers (FDAP), Colleges are currently expected to develop Foundation Degrees on the basis of structured partnerships with universities. In this arrangement, they are funded indirectly through franchise or consortium agreements. Directly-funded colleges must also seek validation from an HEI. The Government argues that such partnerships can help stimulate demand for the Foundation Degree and establish its currency. Colleges have to rely on their HEI partner to accept their proposal for a Foundation Degree and not submit a competing one. At a time when expansion is focused on such awards and when student numbers from the school leaving cohort is about to turn down, this requires a high degree of altruism on the part of some universities. There is every incentive for universities to squeeze out Foundation Degree provision by Colleges.

17. The Scottish Experience

It is worth considering briefly the Scottish experience to see if this, like the US Community College experience, offers any guide to a possible future for the English College system.

In Scotland the distinct College sector has played a crucial role in seeing that 50% of younger learners have had a higher education experience. The Scottish college sector is distinct because it has a clear business focused mission delivering HNCs/HNDs and other business driven awards and courses funded accordingly with an appropriate quality regime within the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework. In Scotland, these higher national qualifications are part of a modular and unitised framework of advanced and non-advanced vocational education that enable directly-funded colleges to develop a strong and distinctive tradition of higher level education largely independent of higher education institutions. In Scotland colleges rival the growth rates achieved by higher education institutions, accounting for over a quarter of the higher education population, compared to around 12% in England.

Given the different cultures and history, it is difficult to suggest any direct read-across between England and Scotland. However, the importance of business-led offerings, of a modular and unitised framework and the willingness of the Scottish Government to support a distinct college sector delivering higher level learning should not be lost on policy makers south of the border.

18. A Vision for Higher Education in Colleges

Widening participation and employer engagement at a local level are the two key strengths of the English college system. This has been recognised by successive Ministers and confirmed in recent legislation. Informed by our discussions with MEG members and US colleagues we suggest the following vision for higher level learning in our Colleges, centred around these two functions:

- Higher Education delivered in Colleges will continue to be part of a varied landscape of provision, linking together a range of school, college, employer, and university initiatives with guidance from Regional Skills Partnerships. They will be an integral part of Lifelong Learning Networks or their successor bodies.
- Colleges will remain focused in their commitment to vocational learning. In England, this will mean remaining close enough to local employers to “respond swiftly to skill needs, to deliver programmes flexibly and to work effectively within a turbulent market”.
- They will build on their traditional strengths including high levels of individual student support and guidance, coupled with an emphasis on teaching, and progression from vocational provision at lower level to developing work-focused skills at higher level, backed by specialist industry knowledge.
- Working in partnership with employers and other providers of HE, successful colleges

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higher education and colleges: a comparison between england and the usa

will share their expertise in the delivery of HE, celebrating the distinctive offer that they contribute to their local community and its economic prosperity. Over time, the value of work-related higher level learning will gain wider recognition from employers, potential students and the wider community. This will counter any residual perception that Higher Education which focuses on the development of work-related skills is in any way inferior to more traditional academic study.

Colleges will continue to reach out to students from groups traditionally under-represented in HEIs and help them realise their potential. They will facilitate progression to higher education and offer a range of bite-sized learning in colleges, the workplace, schools, and other community-based organisations.

19. The Way Forward

With a focus on widening participation and employer engagement, much can be done by Colleges themselves, building on existing strengths and the step change presented by the Further Education and Training Act 2007. These include:

(a) Continuing to work with other providers and employers to

- Develop and share labour market information. This must be on a mutual basis, with all providers sharing information. Currently, the requirement by HEFCE is for colleges to have regard to other HE provision – but with no equivalent duty on HEIs.
- Create opportunities for innovative curriculum developments
- Develop approaches to scholarly activity and professional development related to the world of work and higher level skills
- Share current professional and sector expertise
- Undertake joint research into the key areas of widening participation and employer engagement
- Promote the value of higher-level vocational qualifications with employers, individuals and other educational providers.

(b) Promoting the distinct offering that colleges make to higher level learning:

- Localness of delivery, with rapid response to local employers.
- A high level of individual care and support particularly for “reluctant” learners.
- Responses shaped at least in part by those employers striking an appropriate balance between academic rigour and work relevant skills.
- Inclusive approach to disadvantaged social groups and individuals.
- A flexible curriculum model, based on credit accumulation and transfer to encourage progression and wider participation.
- Creative combination of funding sources including funding for “bite size” courses.
- Understanding and acceptance of institutional roles, strengths and specialisms.
- Establishing the link between academic/skills attainment and business/individual success.
- However, to achieve the vision set out above significant changes need to be made to the organisational and financial structures of English Higher Education. These changes include:
  - Legislative and policy framework.
  - Clear and unimpeded progression pathways which have national recognition and involve a national system of CAT and APEL.
  - Easy access to an impartial adult guidance system suited to both full time students and
those in employment.

- Equal access for all providers of HE to funding sources and the flexibility to use that funding to respond to need.
- A concerted effort to persuade employers and individuals that higher level skills and knowledge is a sound investment, leading to individual and corporate success.

We suggested earlier that if over 40% of the workforce are to have higher level skills, then the elite system that has existed to date needs to be augmented by new approaches in which the College sector will have a major role to play. We look to the Government to end what is widely seen as an ambivalent approach to the College sector.

20. Discussion Points

(a) Legislative and Policy Framework

The legislative and policy framework in which both colleges and universities operate has been subject to change as policy imperatives have changed. This is in contrast to the US context where the legislative framework has remained largely unaltered for some time. Both countries have had to make adjustments to funding approaches in response to changing economic conditions, transferring a greater proportion of the funding burden to students and employers. The impact of this on curriculum design and the curriculum offer is just beginning to be felt in England. Colleges and universities in the US have worked in this type of environment for many years.

A further contrast lies in the respective positions of Community Colleges and Further Education Colleges as recognised providers of higher education. Community Colleges are seen by students, employers and funders as important and focused providers of higher education. Although market forces may sometimes intervene and adversely affect the relationship between colleges and their partner universities, the central role of the Community College is not in question. In England, despite strong endorsement from Government, Colleges are not yet afforded the same degree of recognition. Indeed, the debate around the passage of the Further Education and Training Act 2007 demonstrated that not only was this role for colleges not fully understood, but it was actively opposed by some HEIs. As the Act is implemented and some colleges acquire the power to award their own Foundation Degrees, a more prominent and autonomous role for colleges will emerge. However, during what may be a protracted period, colleges, legislators and funders will need to maintain a consistent and united approach.

(b) Progression and Credits

The US experience shows the value of a credit based approach in responding to the needs of learners as well as employers. Credit based systems have value in attracting students from under-represented groups to take the all important first steps to higher knowledge and skills, gaining confidence and credit in parallel.

In England, although credit systems do exist, they do not have the same importance. Much of the focus of curriculum development and delivery is placed on full qualifications, often drawn from the experience of traditional taught Honours Degree programmes. Flexible, shared or system wide provision is not a key characteristic of the English Higher Education system. Further Education Colleges offering Higher Education are prevented from offering modular or unit based provision by current funding rules. This is perceived by them to be a serious restriction on their ability to respond flexibly and effectively to the needs of employers.
(c) Access to impartial information, advice and guidance

Currently, there are school-based arrangements for pupils, a mixture of arrangements in FE colleges, a discrete service for those in the university system and no real provision for adults in the workplace. The planned Adult Advancement and Careers Service may not address the needs of working adults and is unlikely to align with any provision that will be the responsibility of Local Authorities. Whilst there are pockets of excellence, Labour Market Information (LMI) has not been developed to a consistent standard across the Sector Skills Councils. It is difficult to see what has emerged from Sector Skills Agreements in terms of materials or data that shape Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) provision. Those in work, as opposed to students in full time study or those who are unemployed, are currently poorly served in terms of access to impartial IAG, yet we are expecting these same individuals to commit to lifelong learning and, possibly, extended working beyond the current age of retirement. The present and proposed arrangements for IAG for this group of people are unlikely to be enough to persuade them to undertake either course of action.

DIUS may wish to revise the proposed arrangements for the Adult Advancement and Careers Service. Careers professionals have previously drawn Ministers’ notice to the advantages of the all-age guidance services available to residents of Wales and Scotland: at a time of significant change in the education landscape, this provision continues to offer an exemplar service to local residents. The present arrangements in England continue to generate complaints from pupils, students and adults across our education system.

(d) Funding issues

Approximately 140,000 students are taught on prescribed courses at higher education level in Colleges\(^{38}\) in England. Some 140 colleges are funded directly for their prescribed higher education by HEFCE. Funding for the significant amount of “non-prescribed” higher education geared to professional qualifications comes from the Learning and Skills Council which historically has had a focus (driven by Government priorities) on the development of lower level skills and qualifications.

DIUS may wish to revisit this arrangement, given the changes in the future funding of FE and the development of a combined FE and HE Qualifications Framework.

As indicated in (b) above, the regulations governing prescribed higher education in Colleges do not appear to allow these institutions to receive direct funding for short and flexible forms of provision, such as might be required by employers to enhance the skills and knowledge of their workforce. Funding for this kind of provision is allowed and available to higher education establishments. In these circumstances, colleges could seek indirect funding for such work but, as in all franchise relationships, some of the funding would be retained by the higher education institution to meet the costs of its quality assurance. Unit delivery can already be done with indirect funding but the availability of such provision depends on the approach taken by the validating HEI. Directly funded colleges are unable to offer anything other than whole courses, thus hampering their flexible response to business need.

DIUS may wish to revisit the current interpretation of the existing legislation to ensure that it does not impose any unfair restrictions on directly-funded FECs.

\(^{38}\) Roughly 100,000 students are taught at levels below higher education in HEIs – largely in what were previously Colleges which have been absorbed into universities.
21. Conclusions

UK and US Colleges play distinctive roles in delivering higher level learning that reaches students from diverse backgrounds, is focused on meeting local needs and is vocational in its emphasis. In the US this distinctiveness is lauded and forms part of an integrated approach across many States. In the UK these inherent strengths are less appreciated. Some universities even see colleges as threats to their provision of higher level learning rather than as complementary players and partners in a higher level learning system in which universities, colleges, private sector providers and in-house company provision all have their roles to play.

The recently announced changes in Government coordination (the establishment of DIUS and DCSF) will have a significant impact on colleges and their local communities. At a time when the FE sector is being encouraged to take increasing responsibility for the regulation of its own affairs, the introduction of Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review (IQER) by the QAA and the requirement by HEFCE for all colleges offering HE learning to have an agreed supporting strategy presents the prospect that more, rather than less, external regulation of higher education in FE will result. Both the regulating bodies and the FE sector itself need to respond positively to this challenge and agree approaches which achieve the best balance between quality assurance and value for money and an increasingly mature and confident sector. The newly formed Single Voice for Self Regulation in Further Education will have a pivotal role to play.

At the heart of the success story of US Community Colleges is a system of funding by transferable credit which is responsive to local need and which facilitates roll-on roll-off participation. This promotes progression and the ability of learners to drop into learning at times that suit them. In England this non-linear progression is still viewed as ‘dropping out’ rather than ‘dropping in’. We need a change of attitude. The Government and HEFCE should continue to develop a credit system that builds on the general acceptance by all universities of the European System of Credit Transfer (ECTS).

The Government and HEFCE should also ensure that funding approaches allow Colleges to respond flexibly to learner needs and do not disadvantage them. Hence the Government should consider routing all funding for higher level learning to Colleges through HEFCE and ensuring that colleges like universities can be funded directly for short and flexible provision. In a related move, the Government must develop a coherent lifelong learning approach to education and career information, advice and guidance. The current fragmented approach is not fit for purpose in an age of lifelong learning.

In summary, we propose that the Government must now offer:

- Continued recognition and development of the role of the College sector in achieving a workforce with the higher level skills and knowledge the economy needs.
- Funding approaches which allow colleges to respond flexibly to those needs.
- An approach to regulation which recognises the maturity of the college sector and is in harmony with other initiatives.
- Recognition of the role of colleges in widening participation in higher education.
- Recognition of the distinctive role of HE in FE.

The contribution made by the American Community Colleges to both higher education and to the need for lifelong learning within the workforce is recognised by the US government and the US University System. Without a similarly strong, practical, endorsement of the role of the English College sector we are unlikely to achieve either Dearing’s vision for Further Education or to meet the challenges raised by the Leitch Review some two decades later.
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