

Participation and progression in mass higher education: policy and the FHE interface

David Smith and Jean Bocoek

This article surveys the relationship between the further and higher education sectors in the UK context of mass higher education. The commitment to increase participation rates has highlighted the policy framework of post-school education particularly with regard to participation and progression. Although recent policies have encouraged the FE sector, often in collaboration with partners from higher education, to play a key role in widening participation and particularly the development of alternative progression routes, we conclude that the boundaries between the two, still separate, sectors continue to cause problems for many without A-level qualifications. Two dimensions are explored. The first is the rising importance of higher education provision in further education colleges as a means of widening access. Contrasting experiences in Scotland and England are discussed and related to different patterns of provision and progression. The second is the development of alternative progression routes and the experience of individual learners as they navigate their way through FE and into HE. We conclude that policy objectives based on mass participation in HE increasingly challenge the separate structural arrangements of further and higher education. New arrangements for the management of the FE/HE interface are certainly required if the goals of mass higher education and lifelong learning are to become a reality.

The further education sector has long made an important contribution to higher education. Historically, this has taken two forms. First, as a provider of qualification routes into higher education and, second, as a local provider of higher education, particularly vocational, part-time and non-degree courses. In recent years these contributions have become increasingly important as a consequence of major policy initiatives designed to change the broad framework of post-school education and training. Three facets of educational policy and change are involved.

The first is the shift towards a system of mass higher education and specifically the government target for one in three of the age group to progress to higher education. Such unprecedented expansion has, of necessity, required the development of alternative entry routes to the standard 'matriculation' requirements of two A-level passes (or their equivalent Scottish Highers) since by the late 1980s A-levels were being achieved by only around 15 per cent of the age group (Smithers 1991). Alternative routes are mainly vocational courses such as national certificates and diplomas and general national vocational qualifications (GNVQs), and Access courses which have been developed and located mainly in further education colleges (FECs). These routes are designed to attract students from a wider social and educational background than hitherto.

David Smith, PhD is Senior Research Fellow and *Jean Bocoek* is Research Associate at the Centre for Policy Studies in Education at the University of Leeds. Dr Smith's most recent book is (with Catherine Bargh and Peter Scott) *Governing Universities*. Both authors are currently working on a study of leadership in British universities.

A second facet of change is the delivery of higher education courses, wholly or partially off-campus, as one way of stimulating and responding to demand. Various forms of franchise-type relationships between universities and further education colleges have been created under which the initial year(s) of degree courses are delivered in FECs with students mainly progressing to the university to complete their course. In addition to degree courses, higher national certificates and diplomas (HNC/Ds) are also widely franchised to provide local delivery and access points. Such links have been stimulated both by the drive for cost-efficient expansion espoused by the funding councils and the desire of many former polytechnics to strengthen their local recruitment links with FECs as they moved towards university status in 1992 and a possibly more competitive future.

The third development is the renewed emphasis on vocational qualifications by successive governments thereby highlighting the importance of the traditional strand of higher education provision offered in FECs, namely HNC/D qualifications. This provision has long been part of the mainstream vocational qualifications offered in FE. Having already acquired new importance numerically and strategically because of franchising, the Dearing Report's recommendation that future higher education expansion should include significant provision at sub-degree level has given added emphasis to these qualifications.

The interface between the two sectors, henceforth referred to as the further and higher education (FHE) interface, offers particularly fertile territory in which to explore many of the issues about widening access and the nature of mass higher education. This article focuses particularly on its significance for understanding participation and progression as a consequence of recent policy developments. It draws selectively on recent research, in particular a series of related projects with which the authors individually and jointly have been engaged over the past five years, examining the FHE interface and higher education (HE) in further education (FE). It is divided into four sections. The first sets out the policy context and explores the relationship between the national qualifications framework and the development of alternative entry routes into higher education. The second section examines the importance of HE provision in FE by contrasting the Scottish and English experience of HNC/D qualifications. The third section focuses on individual students and their experiences of new qualifications routes and their progression outcomes. The final section draws together the analysis and offers some conclusions on the relationship between the FHE interface and the development of mass higher education in the UK.

Policy context: the national qualifications framework and alternative entry to HE

The need to raise participation and achievement in 14-19 education has led to repeated attempts to develop a comprehensive yet coherent and, above all, adaptable national qualifications framework incorporating both academic and vocational qualifications. In 1986 the National Council for Vocational qualifications (NCVQ) was established with a remit to create a more effective vocational qualifications framework. At the time there was a high degree of consensus that an improved system of vocational awards was one of the measures required to stem the loss of talent from the educational system, to diversify the curriculum at higher levels by making it more vocationally relevant, and in so doing to widen participation and achievement. The

qualifications framework subsequently created following the 1991 White Paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century* is based on distinctions between the academic track (GCSE/A-levels) the broad vocational track (GNVQs) and the occupationally specific track (NVQs), the so-called triple track system (Young and Spours 1998: 84).

This development was paralleled by changing approaches in higher education towards qualifications systems and entry routes. The 1987 White Paper *Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge* (DES 1987) expressed the then Government's desire for higher education to take positive steps to increase admissions from students offering qualifications other than traditional A-levels. Widening participation was seen both as desirable in its own right and as the key to achieving the cost efficient expansion of student numbers in HE. Further expansion, it was suggested, could only be achieved by widening the entry base which in turn led back to the problem of prerequisite entry qualifications and the narrow base provided by A-levels.

The White Paper added to the traditional A-level route into HE two alternative but henceforth officially recognized routes. The first of these was the vocational route. Essentially this endorsed the growing acceptance of the Business and Technology Council (BTEC now Edexcel) National qualifications which were already a recognized entry qualification to HNC/D courses, and now extended to degree courses in appropriate subject areas. The subsequent development of national vocational qualifications (NVQs) and General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) extended the White Paper's original concept of the vocational route into HE. Devised as a non-occupationally specific vocational certificate, the Advanced GNVQ was intended in due course to subsume the BTEC National (although in some curriculum areas this has not happened).

The second official route recognized by the 1987 White Paper was the Access course. Such courses were developed to cater for mature (defined as post-21) students with or without previous qualifications wishing to return to study in an accelerated fashion. Their previous development had been ad hoc, characterised by 'pockets of activity'. However, the key change initiated by the White Paper was the setting up of a national framework for Access course recognition and quality assurance through a network of local Authorized Validating Agencies (AVAs). These local consortia, usually of FECs and higher education institutions (HEIs), often acting as Open College Networks, led to a proliferation of Access courses registered with the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) and later the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) (Parry 1996).

Increased staying on in post-16 education and higher levels of attainment (including both A-levels and vocational alternatives) contributed to the significant increase in participation in HE from the late 1980s. Between 1987 and 1992 participation almost doubled from 14.6 per cent to 27.8 per cent. By 1994 the age participation index (API) stood at 31 per cent. This expansionary policy, conducted against a background of tight control of public finances, was fuelled by funding policies adopted by the Government and HE funding councils designed to encourage cost-efficient expansion. In 1989, tuition fees were increased substantially and the block grants paid to institutions cut correspondingly. The intention was to provide an incentive to institutions to recruit extra students. The policy, widely known as fees-only funding, led many institutions and in particular the (then) polytechnics to seek to develop stronger links with FE colleges. These colleges had long been a major source of student recruitment, particularly for the polytechnics, which they were anxious to protect and extend.

This period gave rise also to the development of collaborative provision, including franchised courses, which became widespread in England and Wales in the early 1990s. Further education colleges were validated and approved to run all or part of HE courses, either degrees or HNDs, developed and taught in universities. Collaborative provision was intended to widen as well as increase student numbers by seeking new student constituencies for higher education. Policy developments therefore heightened awareness of the role of FE both as a source of student recruitment and as a location for the development of higher education courses targeted at new groups of students. Combined with HE provision already offered by colleges, these developments contributed to the blurring of boundaries between the further and higher education sectors.

In late 1993 the Government announced an end to expansion and inaugurated a period of consolidation with tight controls on student numbers introduced by HEFCE. Although the policy of 'consolidation' imposed a brake on further expansion of the system, widening participation in higher education remained a policy objective, reinforced latterly by the development of the lifelong learning agenda. In recent policy documents the DfEE has claimed that learning 'can help overcome social disadvantage and exclusion: it can help build positive and productive communities' and that 'learning offers individuals personal fulfilment' (DfEE 1996). This emphasis on social disadvantage and exclusion is very much part of the New Labour agenda and links to a broader view of a learning society, not confined to economic utility and vocationalism. In this view, higher education can be defined as a site of tension and contestation between a science, technology and business orientation and a concern with education for democracy, citizenship and social mobility (Shumar 1997: 68). It raises questions which are essentially political and redistributive in nature (Keep and Mayhew 1996).

The participation problem

Longstanding inequalities in participation rates in HE still persist despite repeated policy initiatives to overcome them. The participation problem is part of a wider policy debate about who higher education is for: in short, how participation can be widened and 'the toll of missed opportunity' addressed (HEFCE 1998a).

The targeting of particular types of students in the recruitment process - adult or mature students, women, ethnic minorities, manual and unskilled occupational classes and people with disabilities - has been the dominant approach to the problem of exclusion and under-representation in higher education (Benn and Burton 1995). Driven by a mixture of rationales, from social justice and wasted talent to economic imperative and reskilling, targeting initiatives have achieved variable results. Attention is frequently drawn, not least by the policy makers themselves, to the success of the sector in attracting more women and ethnic minority students. However, claims that under-representation amongst such groups have been 'solved' are to some extent misleading. Women remain under-represented in certain disciplinary areas (notably the physical sciences, engineering and technology) and certain ethnic minority groups remain under-represented in proportion to their presence in the population as a whole (Dearing 1997, Report 5). More intractable still, has been the problem of increasing participation by young students from poor backgrounds (Dearing 1997, Report 6). The policy makers acknowledge that those from the poor-

est areas have a much lower chance of entering higher education than those from the most affluent neighbourhoods (HEFCE 1998a).

The link between qualification routes chosen and the restricted access to higher education experienced by students from lower social class backgrounds has been demonstrated repeatedly in research findings. Most recently Metcalf (1997) showed that young people from lower social classes have lower educational achievement at A-level, a higher propensity to achieve A-level equivalent (i.e. vocational) qualifications, a lower propensity to apply to HE among those qualified and lower success in gaining a place amongst those applying. The Youth Cohort Survey shows this breakdown clearly (for 18-19 year olds) with half of those in the lowest social classes who achieve minimum entry qualifications doing so via the vocational route, whereas only 18 per cent of those from the highest social classes do so. Young people with A-levels are much more likely to go to university than those with A-level equivalent qualifications (82 per cent and 30 per cent respectively). As Metcalf suggests there 'is potentially a double disadvantage'. Young people from lower social classes are more likely to take qualifications which have a lower chance of gaining them successful entry to university and are even less likely to lead to university for people from their social class background (Metcalf 1997).

Explanations for the failure of policy initiatives to tackle the more stubborn inequalities in access to the system have tended to focus on factors external to the HE sector. For example, with respect to the problems of recruitment of less affluent students from socio-economic groups III-V, policy makers have argued that 'success in increasing participation from these groups may not depend solely on the activity of the HE sector; action is required at an earlier stage of the education process' (HEFCE 1996: 26). This external focus relies on the argument that the problem of differential access to the system is related to low expectations and low attainment rates, which make students less likely to progress to higher education (HEFCE 1998a).

Even if we accept that earlier low attainment is a problem in creating learning deficits and hence barriers to participation in higher learning, this should not deflect attention from problems and tensions within the system itself. The failure to engage with large swathes of the population in tackling their learning needs is closely connected to the qualification routes available. In particular, attempts to achieve higher participation from under-represented groups, among young people as well as adults, have been compromised by contradictions in policies directed towards raising participation and achievement. The following sections explore in more detail the linkages between intentions and policies in practice and their often complex and unintended consequences - referred to by policy network analysts as the 'policy mess' (Rhodes 1997: 13).

The role of HE in FE

The development of the national qualifications framework and alternative qualification routes into HE described above disturbed a deeply embedded notion, in HE at least, of progression as linear and vertical. Progression in this model fitted perfectly the historic focus of HE on admitting young people with A-level qualifications. It is about vertical progression to a higher level, although it might also be applied to those, such as adults returning to study on Access courses, who move from non-participation to participation (Arnley *et al.* 1993).

More complex, divergent and non-linear patterns of progression are a typical feature of mass higher education. The demand for progression outlets at the margins of the HE system can be seen as one manifestation of such pressures in the U.K. fuelling the development of higher education provision offered in further education colleges. This strand of provision, of growing importance both numerically and strategically, has three distinctive characteristics. It is largely vocational, a high proportion is part-time, and it consists predominantly, though not exclusively, of non-degree courses.

These three characteristics are largely interdependent. The vocational dimension is manifest in two ways. Over half of all enrolments on non-degree courses are in two, vocationally-oriented subject categories; business and administration, and engineering and technology. Second, over two-thirds of students enrolled on higher education courses in FE colleges are studying on non-prescribed courses which are mainly part-time non-degree courses, such as the HNC, or courses leading solely to a professional qualification. Although classified as higher education by level, they are funded by the Further Education Funding Councils (FEFC) denoting their essentially local recruitment and perceived educational importance*. The significance of *local* provision is perhaps a fourth, and arguably the most important, characteristic of HE in FE.

HNC/D qualifications: two contrasting studies of FHE links

These qualifications play a pivotal role in the link between FE and HE. They provide both an alternative progression route, a significant element of HE provision in FE, and a common qualifications link between FE and HE in that most new universities also offer such courses. The qualifications themselves are a longstanding part of an FE pattern of provision; indeed, it was only following the decision to incorporate the polytechnics and Scottish central institutions (CIs) into the university sector that they became part of mainstream HE. The contrasting experiences of England and Scotland show how the same qualifications can give rise to different patterns of progression as a consequence of different funding and validation systems.

In Scotland, a distinctive feature of HNC provision is its availability in a full-time as well as part-time mode, whereas in England it is overwhelmingly available only in the latter. This is due to the different policies of the Scottish Vocational Education Council (SCOTVEC) as compared to BTEC. Over a four year period from 1990/91 to 1993/4 the percentage of undergraduate enrolments on sub-degree courses in the (then) CIs fell from 30 to 23 per cent whereas over the same period FE colleges experienced a 95 per cent increase in full-time HND enrolments and an astonishing 204 per cent increase in enrolments to full-time HNC courses (Bocock *et al.* 1996). There was both an increase in the number of courses and the number of colleges approved to run them. As a result by 1994/5 the percentage of HE in FE colleges in Scotland was over 28 per cent as compared to 9 per cent in England (Rawlinson *et al.* 1996).

An equally important reason for the divergent patterns in England and Scotland is the different funding systems. In Scotland, all courses in FECs are funded by the Scottish Office Education Department (SOED) including courses designated as

* Following a major review of funding responsibilities conducted in 1998, almost all this work will in future be funded by HEFCE.

higher education. This facilitated expansion, as colleges were able to secure funding for new courses. In England, HND courses, being largely full-time, are funded by HEFCE whether offered in FE or HE. Often the only way of securing funding for new courses in FE colleges was via negotiated arrangements with an HE institution to secure some of their funded student places - hence the development of franchise links.

By contrast, in Scotland there was little franchising but a major increase in so-called articulation links, namely agreements between an FE college and one or more universities to offer places with guaranteed credit (advanced standing) to students successfully completing qualifications in FE. A high proportion of these links rest on HNC/D qualifications (HEQC 1995). Students, therefore, know in advance which universities will accept their qualification and to which year of a degree course they are guaranteed entry. All but two FE colleges developed such formal agreements, although the number of universities involved varied with most colleges having only one or two links, but some having as many as eight or nine (Alexander *et al.* 1995).

Research studies show that students choosing to study these courses in FE colleges have somewhat different characteristics to those enrolling in universities (Bocock *et al.* 1996). Students in the FE sector were older (over 21) and ease of access to the college was an important factor in choosing where to study. Those in universities were more likely to be from socio-economic groups A, B and C1, whereas those studying in FE were predominantly from C2, D and E and were more likely to have fathers with no formal educational qualifications. Students in HE institutions had higher aspirations in terms of desired (final) educational qualifications - often a degree or higher professional qualification. Many had indeed applied, or considered applying, for a degree course at an earlier stage. Students in FE expressed greater doubts about their ability to cope with the course, although interestingly the proportion of students with non-standard or no qualifications was similar in FE and HE.

These findings have subsequently been reinforced by a three year longitudinal study of participation and progression via the FHE route (Gallacher *et al.* 1997). The research identified two distinct groups of students. One was a group of older (21 plus) students who had usually left school without the required qualifications and were using FE as a means to return to study. Only 23 per cent of this group had the required Scottish Highers or A-levels at the time they registered on the HNC/D programme. A second group of younger (under 21) students was more likely to have the minimum formal requirements - although a significant minority did not - but without the grades required for their chosen degree programme. While the first study could only ask about progression intentions, the Gallacher study tracked students through three years on programme to identify outcomes. Significantly, both studies show around two-thirds of all students progressing/intending to progress to a degree course, clearly demonstrating the importance of this route for some students as an alternative to the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP). In addition, the second study confirms a higher proportion (46 per cent) of students from manual working-class backgrounds use this route as compared to the traditional undergraduate population which, for 1993, showed 32 per cent of the student entry to post-1992 universities from this background and 23 per cent of the entry to pre-1992 universities (Dearing 1997).

The English context is somewhat different. Differences in funding arrangements promoted the development of franchised provision rather than articulation links, while validation-based links between universities and colleges developed as a result of licensing agreements from Edexcel held by many universities in relation to HNC/D courses. The absence of a full-time HNC route contributed a further element to the shaping of distinctive English patterns of FHE links and consequently different patterns of progression. Some universities have used HND courses as their preferred means of establishing links with colleges via two-plus-two schemes with the first two years spent in FE. Others have opted to franchise years 0 and/or 1 of degree schemes with linked progression to the university to complete a degree.

Recent research into franchise-type relationships between higher and further education (HEFCE 1998b) explored some contrasting examples of these patterns of provision and the outcomes for different colleges and their students. Eight higher education institutions were selected as case studies. One university had taken a strategic decision, in the early 1990s, to move all its HND provision off-campus into FE colleges. The university regarded HNDs strategically as feeder courses for its own degree schemes and hoped they would draw in new groups of students from all over the region. For one college this meant, as they put it, they had 'come full cycle'. Their original portfolio of HND courses was removed and located in the polytechnic, which was the forerunner of the present university. A decade or so later the courses were back. The research found this cycle of removal and renewal was not uncommon and reflects how volatile some of the FHE boundaries are in practice. In addition, this same college has begun to offer the early years of degree courses in specific curriculum areas, largely those in which HND provision does not exist. This development is new to the college, which now sees itself as an FE/HE college providing significant local HE opportunities.

Another FEC in the study, with a range of specialist provision and therefore a rather narrow curriculum base, had no previous involvement in HE. The college wanted to add HE courses to its portfolio both to offer progression from its specialist base and also to widen its curriculum range. The latter it achieved by offering some joint provision based on curriculum expertise from the college and its university partner. The university was happy to provide funded student numbers because it had no competitive provision in the specialist area. HE courses developed rapidly thereafter with new opportunities for students in a rural area with few alternatives. The profile of the college is now very different and it sees itself as an all-through, but specialist, provider offering complete degree courses in limited curriculum areas.

A third college, with minimum HE experience, was located in a small town with high seasonal levels of unemployment. It had some previous experience of HNCs, but these had largely ceased due to the collapse of a major employer in the town, which these courses had served. The college wanted to raise educational aspirations locally, particularly among young people, but there was no accessible HE on a daily travelling basis. Consequently, the college had itself started one HND which it had subsidised for a year being unable to secure funded places. A subsequent agreement with the university meant two more HNDs could start in curriculum areas with some local employment outlets. 'We've got penny numbers [of students] but in areas like this you have to start somewhere and plug away'. The college sees itself as a 'root and branch' FE college, but one offering limited HE opportunities to help raise the aspirations of students.

These contrasting examples show how the institutional profiles of many FE colleges are becoming more diverse as a consequence of their developing links with universities. The whole FHE interface has undoubtedly become more complex and while this opens up opportunities the following section also reveals how difficult it can be for some students to appreciate what might be available locally.

Individual learners and progression: negotiating a route through the maze

Qualifications routes are a major, yet imperfectly understood, influence on who participates and progresses and there is clearly a deficit in understanding the experience of learners on these non A-level routes through the FE phase prior to entering the system of HE (Davies *et al.* 1997: 10). The key issue is the nature of the progression process itself. For all its narrowness and rigidity, the triple-track qualifications framework combined with the recognition of alternative qualifications routes into HE draws new constituencies of students into participation in the post-16 system and, crucially, has created new opportunities (not necessarily positive) for divergent patterns of progression to emerge. Indeed, it is an assumption contained in the Dearing recommendations for the 14-16 curriculum as well as the review of 16-19 qualifications that individuals have greater choice and flexibility in constructing their learning pathways and that self-management of learning should become a vital competence (Butterfield 1998: 9-10).

The existence of new pathways through the system enables individuals to construct broader educational profiles than hitherto even if the extent to which there is freedom of movement is as yet unclear. The result will almost certainly be that patterns of progression, as with the motivations and experiences of the learners themselves, become far more complex than the simple, vertical, model associated with the traditional A-level route into HE.

In this section, therefore, we look at the student experience by drawing on our own research designed to explore the progression process among students with alternative or 'non-standard' qualifications (Smith *et al.* 1996). Based on in depth case studies of FE students on Access, BTEC and GNVQ courses in four contrasting FECs over a 12 month period, this research sought to uncover the experience of participating and progressing through the education system at intervals during the final course year in college. The intention was to capture the personal testimony of the students as near as possible to the unfolding events of their own progression narratives.

The advantage of this approach lay in the opportunity to capture the incomplete and unsuccessful narratives as well as the successful and to locate them in the evolving events of the rest of their lives as they impinged on the educational process. This was our attempt to give due recognition to the complexity and ambiguity, the nuances and changes, which coalesce to produce the individual outcomes (Beynon 1985); to create at least a partial life history of each student during the tenure of the study and to place ourselves as researchers in the best possible position to understand the meaning of the informants' experiences (Noddings 1991).

These narratives were constructed from a series of formal and informal interviews with an initial cohort of 40 students, which took place at intervals during the course of the academic year. These interviews were intended to combine exploration and questioning within a context of dialogue with the informant (Thompson 1981:

294). The strength of the approach lay in the opportunity for informants to describe their thoughts and actions within the social context of education at or near to critical moments in the progression narrative. Such accounts are less subject to the distortions of memory or the unconscious merging of distant events and 'explanations' for outcomes. The narratives derive validity from their status as knowledge produced by the individual to situate and explain their presence in a particular social reality. These forms of sociological autobiography (Merton 1988) contain an essential 'authenticity' and enable the subjective factor in social life to be given due weight (Blumer 1979: 81). Of course, 'reading' the resulting texts poses its own challenges. The texts are in one sense merely a tool with which to understand perceptions of the world outside. In another sense, the texts are the world outside as experienced by the individuals concerned and offer a rich source with which to begin to comprehend and acquire knowledge about the social processes of education (Bertaux 1981: 33).

Progression outcomes

Despite disparities in age and experience and a complexity of reasons why the students found themselves on different qualification routes, the students in our study possessed a number of common features. First, most were first generation applicants to higher education. Backgrounds were not exclusively working class, but few were from white families with professional and managerial occupations. In most cases the only family experience of higher education was in the case of siblings or other close relatives of the same generation.

Second, students lacked educational self-confidence. The dominant experience of compulsory schooling was one of under-achievement and relative academic failure. Older students in the study had invariably followed this with a history of variable employment and/or child rearing. In many cases, these experiences of adulthood were marred by reduced personal self-confidence due to redundancy, failed relationships, illness/disability or ethnic minority status and associated problems. For younger students, whose life experience is heavily influenced by education, there were few compensating or alternative sources on which to draw. For all students, therefore, finding a successful educational path became inextricably enmeshed with sorting out their lives/futures in a wider context. Students had to decide what sort of person they were or wanted to become, or how to reconstruct lives either disrupted by personal events or undermined by marginalization from life opportunities.

Lack of educational confidence was reflected in a fear of traditional examinations. Many of the younger students were taking GNVQ or BTEC National precisely because they were not A-levels. Unseen, written, essay-style, end-of-year/term exams were associated with failure. Some students joined these qualification paths as an alternative to dropping out of A-levels, when they found they were struggling. Without the option of a qualification, such as GNVQ or BTEC National, many of the younger students would not have contemplated progression to higher education. It would have remained, like A-levels, 'not for them'. Access students also welcomed this approach to assessment; many were acutely conscious of their lack of examination success in the past or for those who had been more successful there was concern whether they would still be able to cope. The vocational orientation, unit structure and, critically, the emphasis on coursework-based assessment were highly valued by the students.

The assessment system of these qualifications routes enabled many students in the study to experience success, with obvious benefits to confidence and aspirations. However, the influence of traditional qualifications continued to be felt. Younger students on alternative qualifications routes without C grades in GCSE Mathematics and English were encouraged to retake them. Possession of key skills or other alternatives was not always accepted as equivalent - particularly for 16-19 year students and especially in the area of numeracy. The burden of (re)taking extra qualifications in their first year added to work pressures. Even where students achieved good grades in BTEC or GNVQ their GCSE grades often received closer scrutiny from admissions tutors than equivalent candidates doing A-levels. While achievement at A-level often redeems poor performance at GCSE, frequently achievement in GNVQ or BTEC seems to require confirmatory evidence of performance at GCSE. Evidence from this and previous studies suggests that achievements in vocational qualifications are often cross-checked with academic ones by admissions tutors (Thompson 1997). Consequently, it is difficult for BTEC National and GNVQ qualifications to 'stand alone' as an accepted alternative/equivalent entry qualification.

These problems were compounded by a lack of clear signposts and route maps through the system. Many students had tried a number of options before settling on their present course. In one case study college, a third of the group either left or changed course yet again having completed a BTEC National. Several of the Access students had similar experiences; tutors drew attention to the many things they had tried, particularly the younger age group. Choosing an appropriate route remained a problem for students; many thought they had simply made the wrong choice when any problem arose.

These factors - lack of familiarity with the educational world, lack of educational confidence, fear of conventional assessment systems, the absence of adequate guidance and signposting into and through the system and the continued domination of traditional qualifications - comprise a formidable barrier to successful progression. The extent of the test, however, has to be judged in association with other factors impinging on individual motivation and commitment to stay the course. As one of the tutors in the study observed: 'An awful lot of people ... have spent a lot of time, you know, ducking and diving'. A crucial part of the tutors' role, as he saw it, was to make people 'face up to tasks'. This was echoed in a slightly different way by a tutor from another college who spoke of the need 'to take the stars out of their eyes [face up to reality]':

Given their personal backgrounds and circumstances the students were continually testing themselves against new demands and contexts. Difficulties experienced in completing assignments and course-related tasks were in part difficulties of commitment and identity. This did not seem to be related to course or qualification followed, but rather in each group there were some students who continued ducking and diving or finding other 'stars' (courses, employment options) to follow. We found no sharp dividing line between the successful and the rest. Some students were 'lost' early on; some continued, but with marginal attendance. Others continued, or struggled, their lives consistently prone to life disruption whether through illness, administrative mishaps or family events which took over their lives (weddings, bereavements, visits to relatives in other countries). While some rose above these difficulties, for others they came to serve as explanations for lack of achievement. It was not difficult to distinguish among several of the younger students on GNVQ

and BTEC, embryonic versions of some of the more mature returners to education on Access courses.

On each qualification route, young males featured disproportionately among the withdrawals. Several withdrew completely, others drifted at the margins. College tutors found this sub-group 'difficult to motivate' and 'at risk' of dropping out. As researchers, we found individuals in this sub-group most difficult to interview. They often struggled to give an account of how they saw their identity and their future. This was not related to ability as measured by examination success. Most expressed a wish just to 'get out'; 'put some money in (my) pocket'; or, 'see something of life'. These were not things which higher education offered.

Paradoxically, there was widespread recognition, even among the marginal students, that without qualifications beyond Level 3 they will be seriously handicapped in attempts to secure interesting and well-paid employment. Higher education is seen as a route to improved self-esteem and the necessary foundation on which to compete for other life-chances. This point was articulated by many students, including those from the younger age group, many of whom were not enthusiastic participants in the learning process.

Encountering systems and structures

The narratives of the progression experience reveal how individuals encounter and make sense of rules and roles of the educational world. How each came to terms with the social processes of participation and progression was determined not just by the key attributes of the individuals themselves, but by the imperatives of the educational structure. Institutional contexts, the processes of application and the interventions of key actors in the progression experience such as college tutors, careers advisors and admissions tutors were instrumental in producing particular outcomes.

Different qualifications routes exert an important influence. Each route tends to be associated with a particular student profile. The maturity associated with Access students, for example, will predispose some (mainly pre-1992) universities to consider an Access student when they might be less responsive to applicants with BTEC or GNVQ qualifications. Students who do not match the course profile can have difficulty in rising above these profile perceptions in order to be 'seen'.

However, the research shows clearly the large element of chance in student choice of qualifications route. On all routes there were those who had not started out on their present path. Some students had already achieved one qualification recognized for purposes of entry to higher education and were now trying another. On completion of their present qualification several students then changed to a different course. A significant minority spent time and energy repeatedly trying out courses and routes in an attempt to find a 'fit' between their abilities, aspirations and sense of self and a progression route whether to higher education or employment.

The choice of route is frequently a product of where students live and what is on offer in the nearest college. This can constrain future choice and the possibility of changing direction. For example, one student in the study could have been on an Access course but was directed, instead, to the BTEC National because, at the point of entry, she wanted to progress to employment. When she changed her mind, she had to apply to higher education with a BTEC profile. Conversely, we found that younger students on the Access courses in the study did not do as well in progression

to higher education as older students and may have been better directed to one of the other qualification routes. However, the students were largely unaware of these issues when choosing their course. It was, moreover, difficult to tell whether guidance was sometimes given but 'not heard'. This further points to the significance of different institutional contexts in supporting the progression of students - perhaps of particular importance to these students because of the absence of informed family guidance.

Non-standard routes have other progression constraints, which may not always be obvious to students at the time they are chosen. In contrast to many A-level combinations, alternative qualifications do not open up a wide range of HE options. The students were limited to the relevant curriculum areas. For younger students in particular this may mean a pre-determined curriculum path decided at the age of sixteen. The evidence from our study, however, clearly shows how frequently students change their mind about courses and outcomes during their time at college. Even a broad vocational qualification, as the Advanced GNVQ is marketed, can turn out to have surprisingly limited outcomes in terms of successful transition to higher education.

These constraints on outcomes are reinforced by college tutors who, often for well-intentioned reasons, steer students towards particular institutions and courses when advising on higher education applications. On the one hand, this maximizes the chances of successful progression; on the other, it can constrain students' aspirations and opportunities: into post-1992 universities and onto sub-degree courses. Such interventions are partly a result of the opaqueness of the system to alternative applicants. University prospectuses and UCAS guides are clear about the standard offer i.e. entry grades required for particular courses and universities. In contrast, the students in our study frequently had to make personal enquiries to individual universities to ascertain basic grade requirements and any additional qualification expectations. This is particularly true in respect of pre-1992 universities where the role of admissions tutors is heavily geared to selection rather than recruitment.

Many admissions tutors in this and other research studies have struggled with the problem of how to pick out the really able candidates - the equivalent of the points score system at A-level. Merit and distinction grades are used to guide decisions, but often in highly individual and inconsistent ways, leaving several of the students (and their tutors) mystified and dejected by rejection. With Access candidates, we found evidence of admissions tutors seeking detailed guidance and further information about candidates from local FE college tutors. This was less prevalent among BTEC students, but one college was attempting to develop a similar approach to Access with its GNVQ students. Overall, however, it was evident that with non A-level qualifications the qualification alone is often not sufficient, necessitating the building of informal networks with local institutions of higher education. This constitutes an additional hurdle of which non-standard applicants largely remain unaware.

The importance of institutional contexts is evident in another respect. Two of the colleges in our study, like many across the sector as a whole, offer internal progression to HE provision. In these colleges, most students who completed their course knew they had a place available, at least to commence an HND, if they wished. Some, whose progression to university was in doubt, registered on the course as a fall-back option. That fall-back option became a reality for one student who completely misjudged the applications process and missed out on a university place. Choosing a qualification pathway and an institution with in-house progression opportunities is

clearly an important ingredient in success for some students. Such options, however, were not always clear at the time of choosing.

The process of application and initial contact with higher education shows the interaction between system factors and individual attributes such as motivation. For two of the groups on one-year courses (Access and the BTEC National students), progression decisions were compressed into a relatively short space of time early in the course. In our assessment, this was felt particularly by the BTEC students who had not entered the course with thoughts of progression specifically in mind. Some of their subsequent problems can be traced back to the need to make early decisions. It created difficulties for tutors, too, because of inadequate time to get to know the students and to 'negotiate' their future aspirations. For many Access students there was some compensation in the contact many established directly with higher education institutions. They made individual visits to pick up information about courses and made field trips to HE open days as part of the course. In contrast, BTEC students had only minimal or non-existent contacts with universities except via UCAS paperwork.

For students on two year courses, with more time to develop their ideas for the future, the encounters with higher education seemed to be heavily influenced by the institutional context. We found evidence in one college of a high level of socialized predisposition to progression. This was not as evident in the other colleges where students were given initial assistance and advice, but subsequent monitoring was not much in evidence - at least in the students' narratives. However, it is not possible to establish any clear correlation between such differences in institutional contexts and outcomes in terms of student progression. While the level of institutional 'grooming' by tutors may be an important influence on success, as we have suggested other factors impacting on student motivation, their ability to stay the course and to decide their futures may be more important. In our study, it was not always the most able (as measured by qualification grade) who progressed. For example, of the three BTEC (computing) students gaining distinction, one left for an unknown destination declaring he had lost interest in computing, while two returned to college to take an HNC part-time. Of these two, one had really wanted to be at university doing a degree, the other who would have preferred, but could not find, computer-related employment. The one student who did reach university to take a degree had achieved a merit grade.

Conclusions: the FE/HE interface and the development of mass higher education in the UK

There is a long history of higher education provision in the further education sector. For much of that history such provision did not really affect the university system, the two running on almost parallel but largely separate tracks. Two sets of policy initiatives, however, coalesced to change these trajectories and focus attention on the interface between the two. The first, was the attempted integration of the academic and vocational tracks, a task still far from complete, but one which perhaps inevitably would disturb, if not unseat, the entrenched concern of the HE sector with A-levels and academic exclusivity. The second set of initiatives concerned expansion, the focus on participation in the post-compulsory system and, as a natural corollary, the opportunities for progression through further and into higher education.

The outcome of these initiatives has been a tension between two different models of mass higher education. One is a minimalist model designed to confine and constrain the effects of increased participation within a larger but essentially unchanged order. In this model, FE acts as a safety valve for the 'formal' or traditional HE system. Pressures arising from increased participation from non-traditional students in post-compulsory education and training, encouraged by the emergence of new, non-A-level, qualifications routes are accommodated by evolving existing provision and developing progression routes at the margins, particularly in FE. From a traditionalist's perspective, the advantage of this model is that it absorbs the ebb and flow of demand, whether for new types of curriculum, opportunities to study in new localities or to provide for new constituencies of students. Control is retained largely by HE and development is channelled in ways which do not transform the existing system of HE (or FE) in any fundamental sense. The boundaries between the two sectors remain largely intact.

The second model is more radical in character. In this model, the boundaries between the two further and higher education sectors become increasingly irrelevant as the lifelong learning perspective takes root. One of the main aims in the radical model is to widen rather than just increase participation and to provide a much better alignment between student preparation on various non-A-level pathways and the provision and pedagogy encountered in HE. It is based on the concept of a single and more coherent system of post-compulsory education and training which replaces the traditional notion of the university and college.

The empirical evidence presented in this article suggests that despite some blurring at the boundaries, the UK system still approximates most closely to the minimalist model. To understand why progress towards a genuinely mass system, still less a more radical system of universal lifelong learning, has been much less rapid than many hoped or anticipated we need to focus on the boundary between FHE and on the impact of those policy initiatives which have gone some way to redrawing the boundary lines.

The FE sector has certainly been successful in some localities and with some categories of previously excluded students in helping to widen participation. In particular it provides alternative qualification routes, which encourage different kinds of students to participate. However, the access afforded by these routes all too frequently directs students into particular types of institutions and to particular types of courses. The provision of HE in FE via franchise-type relationships reinforces the differential distribution of students on these alternative routes. Although it provides a much needed and valued progression route, the vast majority of FE/HE links are with 'new' (post-1992) universities. Elsewhere in the system, progression opportunities for those with non A-level qualifications still lack transparency. Although the link between effective progression and clear and explicit statements of entry criteria has been acknowledged by the DfEE and UCAS to be of 'supreme importance', too many (mainly pre-1992) universities remain reluctant to provide such basic data for the benefit of all applicants to the system (UCAS 1995).

Any serious attempt to widen participation must consider also the experiences (and problems) of the learners themselves. Although this is an under-researched area, the result of our own study suggests that outcomes are not a straightforward reflection of ability or achievement. Frequently, progression is a non-linear process. Many learners need to be able to acquire qualifications in a combination of linear and sideways movements, to move in and out of the system, to see the points of achievement

and to have their previous learning experiences recognized: in short, to climb ladders as well as traverse territories (Waterhouse 1998). The HNC/D route is highly successful for many students precisely because it facilitates a graduated/stepped qualification pattern, which helps to encourage and sustain participation among those whose commitment is uncertain.

In general, there has been a failure to eradicate the structural problems that hinder progression from further to higher education for many alternatively qualified students. Frequently this has been compounded by a mismatch between further and higher education policies or, worse, the focus has been deflected onto the deficiencies of the would-be participant - on low attainment, low expectations and the barriers inherent in their social, economic or cultural background. Difficult and challenging though they have sometimes been, the moves towards a mass system of HE in the UK context have been contained within the existing structures of further and higher education. In the process the boundaries between the two sectors have been eroded in places but they remain substantially intact.

In a system committed to lifelong learning, however, such boundaries too easily become barriers. There is already evidence to suggest that institutions at local and, in some cases, regional level are beginning to encounter serious problems with a system still based essentially on the maintenance of existing boundaries between separate sectors. The task facing policy makers in the short term will be to devise new sets of arrangements for managing the interface between further and higher education. Without the establishment of a more coherent system of post-school education and training, however, it is unlikely that in the future lifelong learning will prove any more effective than the present version of 'mass' higher education in tackling the nation's learning deficits.

References

- ALEXANDER, H., GALLAGHER, J., LEAHY, J. and YULE, W. (1995) Changing patterns of higher education in Scotland: a study of links between further education colleges and higher education institutions. *Scottish Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*, 2, 25-54.
- ARNLEY, N., MUNN, P. and TETT, L. (1993) *Negotiating the Labyrinth: Progression Opportunities for Adult Learners* (SCRE).
- BENN, R. and BURTON, R. (1995) Targeting: is Access hitting the bull's-eye? *Journal of Access Studies*, 10(1) 7-19.
- BEYNON, J. (1985) Institutional change and career histories in a comprehensive school, in S. Ball and I. Goodson (eds) *Teachers' Lives and Careers* (Lewes: Falmer).
- BERTAUX, D. (1981) From the life history approach to the transformation of sociological practice, in D. Bertaux (ed.) *Biography and Society: The Life History Approach in the Social Sciences* (London: Sage).
- BLUMER, H. (1979) *Critiques of research in the social sciences: an appraisal of Thomas and Znaniecki's The Polish peasant in Europe* by Herbert Blumer, with a new introduction by the author (New Brunswick N.J.: Transaction Books).
- BOCOCK, J., BROWNLOW, S., HAWKINS, A., KEDNEY, B., TINDALL, R. and WARRANDER, A. (1996) *Comparisons of Higher Education Provision in Further Education Institutions and Higher Education Institutions* (Scottish Office Education Department).
- BUTTERFIELD, S. (1998) Conditions for choice? The context for implementation of curricular pathways in the curriculum, 14-19, in England and Wales. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 28 (1) 9-20.
- DAVIES, P., WILLIAMS, J. and WEBB, S. (1997) Access to higher education in the late twentieth century: policy, power and discourse, in J. Williams (ed.) *Negotiating Access to Higher Education: the Discourse of Selectivity and Equity* (Buckingham: SRHE/Open University Press).
- DEARING REPORT (1997) *Higher Education in the Learning Society: National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education* (London: NCHE).
- DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE (DES) (1987) *Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge*, Cmnd 114 (London: HMSO).
- DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT (DfEE) (1996) *Lifetime Learning: a Policy Framework*.

- DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE/DEPARTMENT FOR EMPLOYMENT/WELSH OFFICE (1991) *Education and Training for the 21st Century* (London: HMSO).
- GALLACHER, J., LEAHY, J. and MCFARLANE, K. (1997) *The FE/HE Route: New Pathways into Higher Education* (Report for the Scottish Office Education Department).
- HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDING COUNCIL FOR ENGLAND (HEFCE) (1996) *Widening Access to Higher Education: A Report by the HEFCE's Advisory Group on Access and Participation* (Bristol: HEFCE).
- HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDING COUNCIL FOR ENGLAND (HEFCE) (1997) *The Influence of Neighbourhood Type on Participation in HE, Interim Report* (Bristol: HEFCE).
- HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDING COUNCIL FOR ENGLAND (HEFCE) (1998a) *Council Briefing*, 16 April (Bristol: HEFCE).
- HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDING COUNCIL FOR ENGLAND (HEFCE) (1998b) *The Nature of Higher and Further Education Sub-contractual Partnerships* (Bristol: HEFCE).
- HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY COUNCIL (1995) *Aspects of FE/HE collaborative links in Scotland* (London: HEQC).
- JOHNSON, J. DEERE, M., HIGGINS, T., MEGSON, C. and CROUDACE, C. (1995) *Practical Progression: Matching Advanced GNVQs to HE Programmes* (Cheltenham: UCAS).
- KEEP, E. and MAYHEW, K. (1996) *Towards a learning society - definition and measurement*, *Policy Studies*, 17 (3), 215-232.
- METCALF, H. (1997) *Class and higher education: the participation of young people from lower social classes* (London: Council for Industry and Higher Education).
- MERTON, R. (1988) Some thoughts on the concept of sociological autobiography, in M. White Riley (ed.) *Sociological Lives* (Newbury Park: Sage).
- NODDINGS, N. (1991) Stories in dialogue, caring and interpersonal reasoning, in C. Witherell and N. Noddings (eds) *Narrative and Dialogue in Education* (New York: Teachers College Press).
- PARK, A. (1994) *England and Wales youth cohort study: Cohort 4: young people 18-19 years old in 1991: report on Sweep 3* (Sheffield: Employment Department).
- PARRY, G. (1996) Access education in England and Wales 1973-1994: from second chance to third wave, *Journal of Access Studies*, 11 (1), 10-33.
- RAWLINSON, S., FROST, D. and WALSH, K. (1996) *The FE/HE Interface: a UK Perspective* (Institute of Employment Studies: Report 316).
- RHODES, R. A. W. (1997) *Understanding Governance: Policy Networks, Governance, Reflexivity and Accountability* (Buckingham: Open University Press).
- SHUMAR, W. (1997) *College for Sale: A Critique of the Commodification of Higher Education* (London: Falmer Press).
- SMITH, D., BOCOCK, J. and SCOTT, P. (1996) *Standard Systems, Non-Standard Students: Experiences of Progression from Further to Higher Education* (Report of project funded by the Esme Fairbairn Charitable Trust, University of Leeds: Centre for Policy Studies in Education).
- SMITHERS, A. (1991) *The Vocational Route into Higher Education* (Manchester University: School of Education).
- THOMPSON, A. (1997) Gatekeeping: inclusionary and exclusionary discourses and practices, in J. Williams (ed.) *Negotiating Access to Higher Education: the Discourse of Selectivity and Equity* (Buckingham: SRHE/Open University Press).
- THOMPSON, P. (1981) Life histories and the analysis of social change, in D. Bertaux (ed.) *Biography and Society: The Life History Approach in the Social Sciences* (London: Sage).
- WATERHOUSE, R. (1998) A University for Life, in P. Mitchell (ed.) *Beyond the Universities: The New Higher Education* (Aldershot: Ashgate).
- YOUNG, M. and SPOURS, K. (1998) 14-19 education: legacy, opportunities and challenges, *Oxford Review of Education*, 24 (1), 83-97.