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Original Citation

Orr, Kevin (2014) Higher Education in Further Education and its impact on social mobility in England. In: Society for Research in Higher Education, Post-Compulsory and Higher Education Network, 6th November 2014, SRHE, London, UK. (Unpublished)

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Higher Education in Further Education and its impact on social mobility in England

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Paper presented to
SRHE Post-Compulsory and Higher Education Network

6th November 2014

Further education (FE) colleges in England have been providing a range of higher education (HE) for decades and today are a small but integral part of the HE sector. Despite political reforms designed to expand the provision of HE in FE, especially following the government's Dearing Inquiry into HE (1996-97) the proportion of HE students in FE colleges has remained curiously stable at or just below ten per cent for over a decade, even as the numbers in HE have expanded rapidly. As long ago as 2006 the government agency in charge of HE funding had noted the same issue remarking that, "We do not now why this is" (HEFCE, 2006: 7). Through examining recent statistical data produced by government agencies, this paper seeks to analyse and explain that curious proportional stability in relation to HE in FE's often stated aim of enhancing social mobility (see for example Hartley and Groves, 2011: 5). The government as a whole is keen to promote social mobility (Cabinet Office, 2011) and it identifies a range of measures to determine social mobility, but it does not give a single definition of what the term means. Hutton (2008: 8 cited in Hughes, 2010: 2) gives a broad definition of social mobility, as the opportunities available to people so that they may "live a life that someone would have reason to value". This relational definition is appropriate but like so much discussion around the term, upwards mobility is implied. As Hughes (2010, 2) herself suggests, social mobility can be both negative and positive for the individual who may rise or fall through the structures of society. For this paper, though, social mobility is understood as

allowing those from all HE settings to have the same opportunities according to their level of study.

Though the proportion of HE students in England has been relatively stable, the types of courses on offer in colleges have altered markedly, and there are also wide regional variations in the provision of HE in FE. In line with Parry et al (2012) this paper will argue that the numbers of students involved in HE in FE provision are still very largely determined by local and national structural elements, mainly government policy, rather than individuals' changing aspirations. Nevertheless, there is evidence to suggest that HE in FE provides opportunities for study that do not exist elsewhere and so, by certain definitions, it may be contributing to social mobility through widening participation in education. As Hayward and Hoelscher (2011, 317) have highlighted, however, there has been little research into the effectiveness or efficiency of the policy of widening participation in HE because whatever "redistributive potential" it may have is dependent on the HE institutions in which students enrol. The data on destinations examined for this paper suggest a mixed experience but one where HE in FE students generally do worse than other students in financial terms. So, while analysing these data, this paper also seeks to question some of the reductive assumptions about widening participation and its relation to social mobility and social justice. As Gale graphically explains:

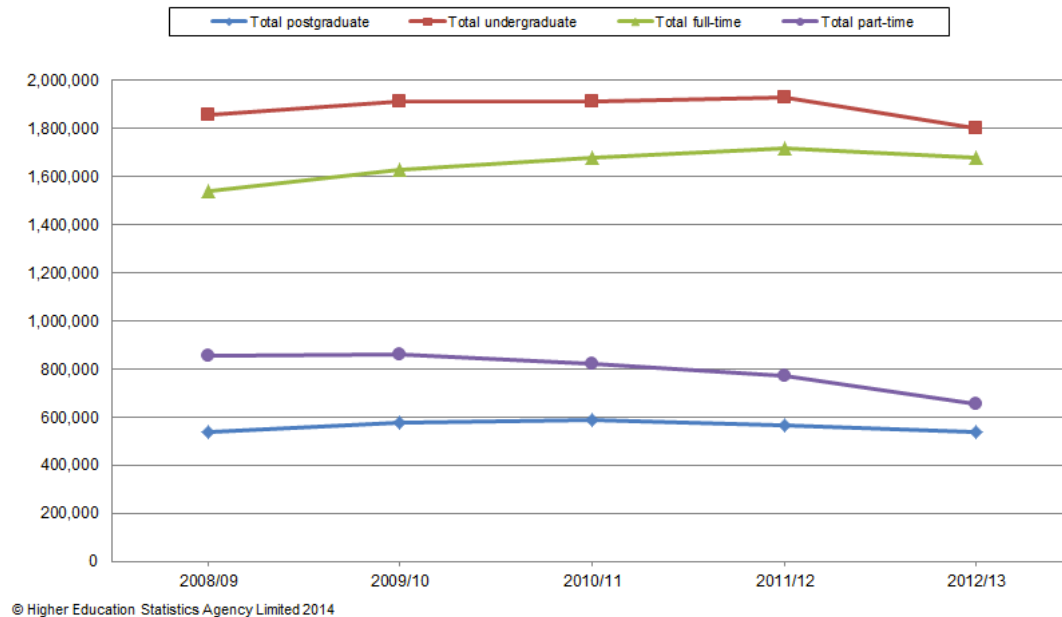
While university student recruitment departments focus on 'bums on seats', equity advocates draw attention to which bums, in what proportions and, more to the point, which seats, where. But if the counting of 'bums' is crude, so is the differentiation of seats. Just distinguishing between courses and universities and scrutinizing the distribution of groups is a limited view of equity.

(Gale 2012: 138)

Clegg (2011: 104) also questions this spurious conflation of the value of HE with social mobility even as it may raise hopes. I share the view of Zipin et al (2013a: 1-2) who cite Berlant (2011) to argue “that optimism is a cruel experience for many in the historic present, given lived conditions fraught with structural obstacles that thwart even the most reasonable strategies for pursuing futures hopefully.” Widening participation in HE may be positive, but it is not the same as social mobility and may simply be a further means of the reproduction of inequality. Clegg (2011: 104) also questions the conflation of certain students’ lack of social or economic capital with their having a general deficit and all of this suggests the need to discuss not just entry to HE but the HE curriculum itself, which is where the paper will finish. I start by discussing some of the trends in HE before focusing specifically on HE in FE.

Trends in UK higher education

England’s HE sector is currently undergoing major change, even before the government lifts the cap on the numbers of students that individual institutions can recruit. Demand for HE amongst 18 year-olds in UK remains high and by the 15 January 2014 deadline 35 per cent of all 18 year-olds had applied through UCAS for a place in HE, the highest rate ever. This masks some wide regional variations: for example the rates were 44 per cent in London and 30 per cent in the South West (HEFCE, 2014a 12-13). The number of full-time undergraduates rose by eight per cent in the year 2013-14 following several years of decline. After consistent growth through the first decade of the century, the overall number of UK and other EU students enrolling on full-time undergraduate programmes at higher education institutions (HEIs) and FE colleges had fallen by 9 per cent (around 33,000) between 2010-11 and 2012-13 (ibid.; 9). Much of this fall, sixty per cent of full-time undergraduate entry, can be attributed to the significant drop in enrolments for undergraduate courses other than first degree (ibid.;13), see Graph1 below.



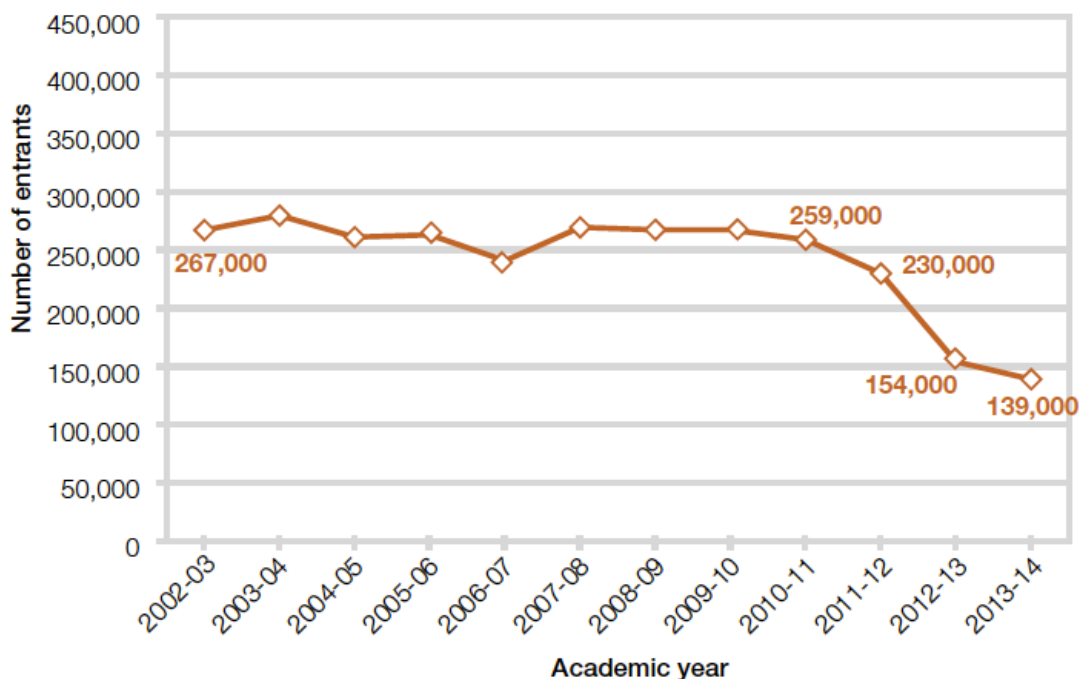
Graph 1: All student enrolments on HE courses by level of study and mode of study 2009/09 to 2012/13 (HESA, 2014)

These courses include Foundation Degrees and Higher National Diplomas (HNDs), for example. Only 6 per cent of the decline in overall enrolments between 2008-09 and 2012-13 is explained by changes in numbers of entrants to first degrees (HEFCE, 2014b: 1). Rather, there has been a “continuing shift” towards enrolment on full-time degree courses at HEIs (HEFCE, 2014a: 12).

Within this pattern of decline, entrants to Foundation Degrees at all institutions fell from 31,000 in 2010 to 25,000 in 2012-13. This general shift to full-time degrees has had a contradictory effect on HE in FE which saw an increase of 5,000 enrolments in other undergraduate courses at FE colleges; 3,000 more on foundation degree courses and 2,000 more on HNDs (HEFCE, 2014b: 2). These courses are now concentrated in colleges: in 2012-13 there were 25,000

students on other undergraduate courses at FE colleges compared with 14,000 in HEIs (ibid.; 4). This is further discussed below.

Between 2008 and 2012 the number of entrants to part-time HE courses (based on the HESA definition of studying for less than 21 hours per week or less than 24 weeks per year) fell by 37 per cent, as compared to just 7 per cent in the full-time market (Oxford Economics, 2014: ii). This means that the number of part-time undergraduate students in 2013-14 is half what it was in 2010-2011 (HEFCE, 2014a: 4), see Graph 2 below. As well as the recession leading to individuals and organisations having less money to pay for part-time professional development courses, Oxford Economics in their report for HEFCE (2014: 31) identify a series of government policies as contributing to this decline. This includes the removal in 2008 of funding from those students who were studying towards a qualification that was lower or equivalent to one they already held, which led to some providers of part-time courses losing as much as 40 per cent of their funding. Similarly, there has been reduced funding for postgraduate students, many of whom were part-time, as well as other financial disincentives for HEIs to offer part-time course. Fees for part-timers rose by 27 per cent between 2007-08 and 2010-2011 (Callender and Wilkinson, 2012: 10), well above inflation. FE college-based HE is cheaper, but has still risen significantly in price.



Graph 2: UK and other EU part-time undergraduate entrants 2002-03 to 2013-14 in all HE provision (HEFCE, 2014a: 14)

Despite some politicians' rhetoric, poverty of ambition on the part of would be students is not an explanation here. Rather, the changing fees regime on top of the economic crisis have had a profound effect on HE. These structural changes across the whole HE sector have, moreover, had particular effects on HE in FE provision¹. Generalisations about HE in FE have to be made with great caution because of the enormous regional differences in what is on offer, which can be dominated by single colleges. In 2010-11, for example, of the 17,445 first degree entrants in all FE colleges, 1,370 went to Newcastle College, 735 went to Grimsby Institute of Further and Higher Education and 1,035 went to Bradford College. The majority of colleges had fewer than one hundred such students so

¹ HE in FE provision is divided between prescribed HE, which is funded by HEFCE either directly to colleges or indirectly through a linked university, and non-prescribed HE, normally funded by the Skills Funding Agency. This includes courses leading to awards from the Association of Accounting Technicians and the Institute of Legal Executives. Non-prescribed provision is considerably smaller than prescribed. The data on which this paper is based relates to prescribed HE.

the presence of a college with ambition to be an HE provider, such as that in Grimsby, can have a major local effect especially in comparison to areas with no such college. Nor can it be asserted that only students with low entry grades take HE in FE courses; 3,000 students with the equivalent of A level grades of ABB or better are in college-based HE courses (HEFCE, 2014a: 4). With these caveats, this paper nonetheless seeks to describe the overall provision and proportions of HE in FE to highlight any systemic effects of this provision on widening participation and then on social mobility.

The major structural change affecting HE in FE has already been mentioned, which is the increasing concentration of other undergraduate (OUG) courses in HE in FE as HEIs have dropped them, especially as part-time provision. As Parry (2009: 336) notes, this was apparent even a decade ago, though the process has become even more rapid. OUG courses are still closing in HEIs, but have stabilized in colleges (HEFCE, 2014a: 15-16). Within this falling OUG provision, the overall number of students taking a Foundation Degree is falling while at the same time the Foundation degree is becoming almost exclusively an HE in FE course. HEIs are more likely to sign students up for a full degree course, to help ensure three or more years' income, and have the foundation degree only as an expedient exit award. The number of part-time HE students in colleges has also dropped off, but not by the extent of HEIs, especially in OUG courses.

What all of this implies is that while the proportion of HE provided in colleges and funded by HEFCE has remained relatively consistent at or just below ten per cent, the courses that constitute that proportion have changed considerably even in the past two years. Significantly, this is the case despite fluctuations in the total number of HE students. When Parry et al wrote their comprehensive report on HE in FE in 2012 the proportion was eight per cent. What they wrote then remains the case now: "There is little evidence of overall growth in college-taught HE" despite government policy to expand HE in FE (Parry et al, 2012: 11). In particular the introduction of differential fees up to a limit of £9,000 has not led to

the expected expansion of HE in FE, though colleges' fees are typically £2,000 less per year for full-time HE courses. Explanations that were suggested by Parry et al in 2012 also remain pertinent, "the specificity of the local and regional markets for students and for courses sought by employers", the "low visibility and status" of HE in FE and the organisation of higher education so as "to keep HE and FE in separate sectors" (ibid.; 11). This last explanation is especially evident in how some HEIs have recently dropped franchise arrangements with colleges, sometimes at very short notice, demonstrating the inequality in their former relationship. But if the type of courses has been changing, are HE in FE students the same, and does that help explain the consistent proportion?

As Parry et al found in 2012 (ibid.; 12-13) HE in FE students are older and more likely to be part-time than university students. They are also more likely to come from areas that have had low levels of participation in HE as measured by HEFCE (HEFCE 2013a: 8). These measurements deserve some discussion, however, as well as some skepticism. For fifteen years HEFCE has been using Participation of Local Area (POLAR) classifications for small areas across the UK to denote the level of participation of young people in HE. These groups or quintiles are ranked from 1 (lowest rate and considered most disadvantaged) to 5 (highest rate and considered most advantaged). The most recent publication based on this dataset (POLAR 3) was in February 2014 (HEFCE, 2014c). Harrison and McCaig (2014) argue that these data represent an ecological fallacy, that 'you are where you live'. In other words, any statistical inference made about individual students based on their neighbourhood is spurious. Harrison and McCaig's statistical analysis of what HEFCE refers to as "low participation neighbourhoods" (LPNs) has found that they have limited granularity; that more disadvantaged families live outside these neighbourhoods than live within them; and that they have a higher than expected proportion of relatively advantaged families (ibid.; 1). While highly critical of the diverse uses of LPN statistics in policy, Harrison and McCaig nevertheless conclude that they:

serve a useful purpose as a simple and reliable (in the statistical sense) proxy for a broad concept of historical educational disadvantage. They are useful in identifying the sorts of areas in which young people with the potential to enter higher education with additional support might be found.

(ibid.; 21)

This is the use to which they are put here and they show that HE students from the lowest quintile are twice as likely to attend a further education college (FEC) as an HEI. The inverse is the case for the highest quintile. See Table 1 below.

Institution type	POLAR3 quintiles					Total
	1	2	3	4	5	
Registered at HEI	10.2%	14.9%	19.2%	23.7%	32.0%	100.0%
Registered at an FEC	20.9%	21.5%	22.3%	19.1%	16.2%	100.0%
Taught at HEI	10.0%	14.7%	19.1%	23.8%	32.4%	100.0%
Taught at an FEC	19.3%	20.8%	22.0%	20.3%	17.5%	100.0%
Overall	10.7%	15.2%	19.3%	23.5%	31.4%	100.0%

Table 1: Distribution of young 2011 HE entrants by POLAR3 quintile, grouped by their registered and teaching institution types (HEFCE, 2014c: 56)

HE students in colleges are also more likely to live closer to home than those in HEIs (HEFCE, 2014c: 56). These figures do not, though, include the period of most concentration of HE in FE students in other undergraduate courses over the past three years. Given the data that is available, nevertheless, a reasonable surmise is that the type of students in FE has remained consistent even as the provision has changed. The stability of the proportion of students in HE in FE

provision exists because of the stubborn inequality of English society, even as the form of the inequality alters because having a degree is no longer the social marker it once was. This surmise, which may help to explain the stability of the proportion because HE in FE, is expanded below.

As Table 2 below shows, even as the overall proportion of young students in HE increased from 30 to 35 per cent, the gap between those students who received free school meals and those who did not only moved one percentage point. More disadvantaged young people may have degrees, but the differential with more advantaged student remains. The cross-section of the population in education is similar in its proportions, even if the numbers in that cross-section are stable. So, as FE colleges transform their HE provision, the students proportionally remain those who are most disadvantaged. Plus ça change, plus ç'est la meme chose.

	FSM	Non-FSM	Gap (%)	All
2005/06	13%	33%	19	30%
2006/07	14%	33%	19	31%
2007/08	15%	33%	18	31%
2008/09	17%	35%	18	33%
2009/10	18%	36%	18	34%
2010/11	20%	38%	18	35%

Table 2: Estimated percentage of maintained school pupils aged 15 by Free School Meal (FSM) status, who entered UK HE (HEIs and FE colleges) by age 19 in academic years 2005/06 to 2010/11 (DBIS, 2013: 4)

HE in FE and social mobility

The stability of these proportions raises the issue of how effective is HE in FE for social mobility. Given that the proportion is stable, what does widening participation mean for social mobility?

For HEFCE widening participation involves:

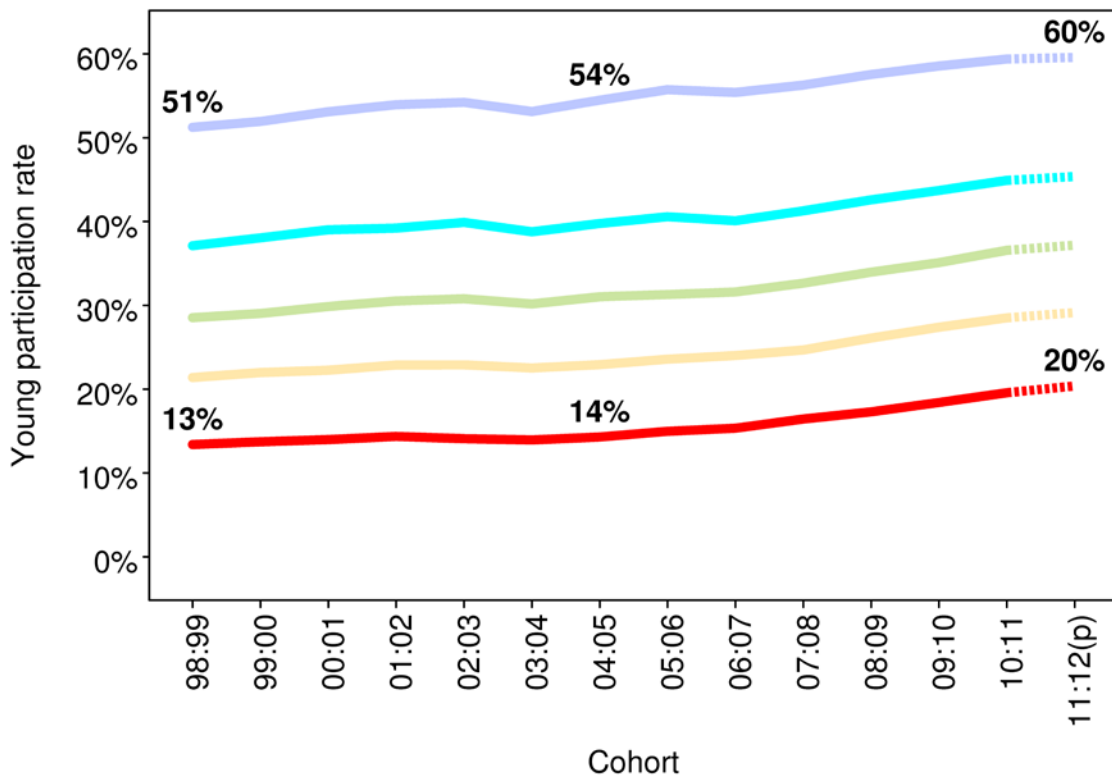
activities to recruit students from the groups that HEIs have identified as under-represented, and then to ensure their success. These groups may include disabled people, either as a group in their own right or as students who are both disabled and/or belong to another underrepresented group.

(HEFCE, 2002: 4)

This definition dates from the time of the New Labour government, which set a target for the UK of fifty per cent participation in HE for young people. Similarly Ireland, Australia and the USA have targets for participation in HE and the OECD also supports this expansion of the sector (Gale 2012: 240). Though a desire for social mobility may be part of the explanation for this, the concept of human capital is the major political motivation. The OECD (2001: 18) defines human capital as: *The knowledge, skills, competencies and attributes embodied in individuals that facilitate the creation of personal, social and economic well-being.* While the economic crisis has somewhat dampened rhetoric associated with the knowledge economy, there remains in the UK an emphasis on the supply side for skills, as a means to economic development. This is explained in relation to human capital. While the causal connection between skills and growth has been soundly refuted (see inter alia Brown et al, 2008; Coffield, 1999, Rikowski, 2001 and Avis 2007), human capital is still a resonant justification for neoliberal governments that are ideologically unwilling to intervene in the demand side of the labour market. The concept of human capital also has the effect of rendering individuals responsible for their own perpetual development to enhance their

value in the market place, regardless of structural restrictions. Hence, for example, there is the promotion of ‘employability’ amongst young people, ignoring the collapse of job opportunities for those young people following the economic crisis. This human capital conceptualisation, which is the central motivation behind increasing the numbers in HE, needs to be remembered when interpreting data relating to social mobility.

As the graph below illustrates across all five quintiles for participation in HE as a whole the rate proportion has been steadily increasing with a steady differential of 40 percent. So, we may surmise from what we learned from Table 1 that the lower participation quintiles are being increased partly by growth in HE in FE while all HE, including elite HE, is growing at a similar rate.



Graph 3: Trend in young participation rate for areas classified by HE participation rates (POLAR3 classification, adjusted) (HEFCE 2013b: 17)

This graph may indicate widening participation in HE, and if the main aim is associated with human capital then that aim may have been achieved. That is, a more educated workforce. But this does not necessarily suggest social mobility, as the social differences remain intact. The ceiling is lifting as quickly as the floor. Once again, it suggests that higher education per se is no longer a marker of privilege, which recalls the point made by Hayward and Hoelscher (2011, 317) about the importance of the educational setting .

The table below gives information on the destinations of first degree graduates living in England who had studied full-time, were aged 20 to 22 at the start of their last academic year in UK Higher Education and were in full-time employment six months after graduation.

Aged 20-22 in graduation year			
<i>Employment SOC of 2009/10 graduates</i>			
SOC on entry to HE	Most advantaged (SOC 1 to 3)	Less advantaged (SOC 4 to 9)	Total
Most advantaged (SOC 1 to 3)	70%	30%	100%
Less advantaged (SOC 4 to 9)	65%	35%	100%
Gap (pp)			5
<i>Employment SOC of 2010/11 graduates</i>			
SOC on entry to HE	Most advantaged (SOC 1 to 3)	Less advantaged (SOC 4 to 9)	Total
Most advantaged (SOC 1 to 3)	72%	28%	100%
Less advantaged (SOC 4 to 9)	66%	34%	100%
Gap (pp)			6
<i>Employment SOC of 2011/12 graduates</i>			
SOC on entry to HE	Most advantaged (SOC 1 to 3)	Less advantaged (SOC 4 to 9)	Total
Most advantaged (SOC 1 to 3)	71%	29%	100%
Less advantaged (SOC 4 to 9)	67%	33%	100%
Gap (pp)			4

Table 4: English domiciled full-time first degree graduates in full-time employment six months after graduating: estimated percentages for Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) on entry to Higher Education and in employment

The data above relates to the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) of students' parents on the students' entry to HE and the SOCs of graduates themselves when they are in employment six months after leaving. SOC codes 1 to 3 are: managers and senior officials; professional occupations; associate professional and technical occupations. This grouping is a commonly used approximation of graduate level occupations (HEFCE, 2013b: 24). SOC codes 4 to 9 are: administrative and secretarial occupations; skilled trades occupations; personal service occupations; sales and customer service. This grouping is a commonly used approximation of non-graduate level occupations. Six months after graduation graduates may not have reached their final occupational level but nonetheless from this data 71 per cent of the more advantaged are in the higher occupations compared with 67 per cent of those from the less advantaged grouping. The gap of four per cent may suggest some mobility, but this dichotomy between occupations is a crude and anachronistic one. Fewer people now identify themselves as being in skilled trades and the word manager is attached to all manner of occupations (see Dorling 2014 for a compelling discussion on the contemporary understanding and measurement of social class). Nonetheless, the same data indicates that qualifiers from FECs in 2010-11 were a smaller proportion of employed full-time undergraduate (8 per cent) in professional occupations than qualifiers from HEIs. Almost a quarter of equivalent qualifiers (23 per cent) from HEIs were employed in these occupations (HEFCE, 2013c: 20).

The figure below shows the differential in outcome between FE colleges and HEIs in relation to destination after six months. Two areas are pertinent here; firstly that between four and six percent more FE graduates are unemployed than graduates from universities and the latter are also much more likely to be in further study, which would be more available in universities. Such postgraduate study is arguably becoming a new and necessary distinguisher of social position.

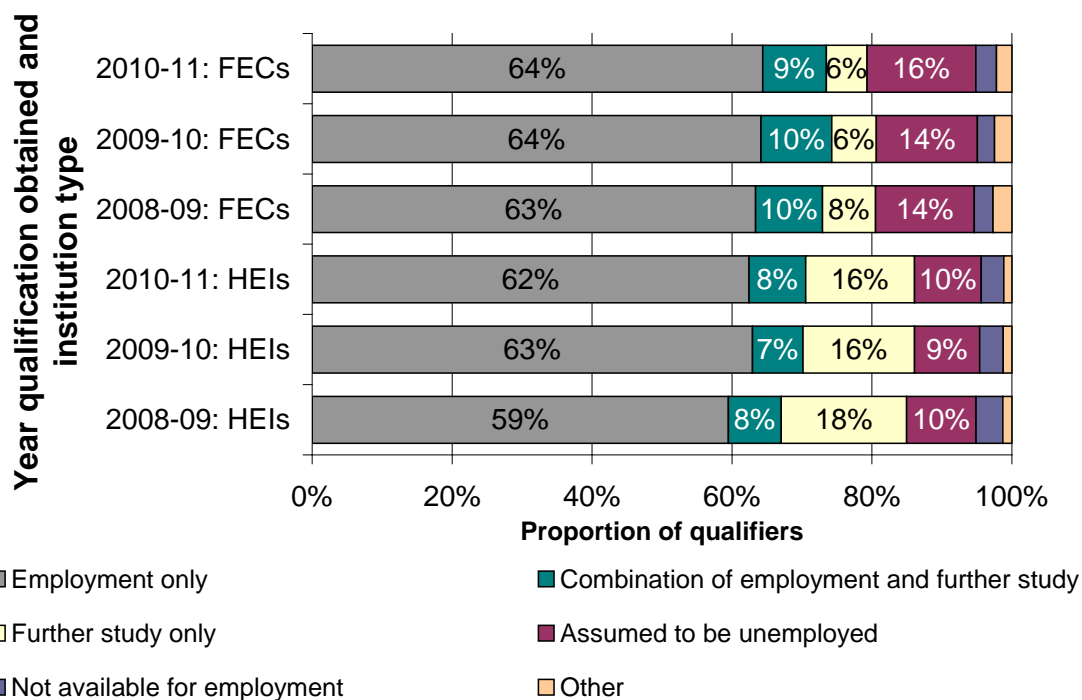


Figure 1: Destinations of full-time first degree qualifiers from English HE providers by academic year and institution type (HEFCE, 2013c: 11)

For salaries the differences are even starker. As the table below indicates mean starting salaries for HE in FE graduates were 16 per cent less than those from HEIs in 2010-11, which matched the pattern of the previous five years (HEFCE 2013c: annex C11). The median salary differences are even greater because more HE in FE graduates earn much less than HEI graduates.

		% disclosed salary	Lower quartile	Upper quartile	Median salary	Mean salary
First degree						
	English FEC	88%	£12,000	£20,000	£15,000	£16,500
	English HEI	71%	£15,000	£23,000	£19,000	£20,000
Foundation degree						
	English FEC	85%	£12,000	£19,000	£15,000	£16,500
	English HEI	63%	£16,000	£27,000	£20,000	£21,500
Other undergraduates						
	English FEC	81%	£13,000	£25,000	£18,000	£20,000
	English HEI	71%	£21,000	£23,000	£21,500	£22,000
All undergraduates						
	English FEC	86%	£12,000	£20,000	£15,000	£17,500
	English HEI	70%	£15,000	£24,000	£20,000	£20,000

UK domiciled full-time undergraduate leavers from English FECs and HEIs entering full-time paid employment in the UK, by level of qualification obtained and salary, 2010-11 (HEFCE, 2013c: annex c11)

The graph below displays similar information about starting salaries for first degree graduates against type of institution. While the £15,000 to £19,999 bracket is equally divided between colleges and HEIs, below that bracket there are proportionally more college graduates and above there are proportionally more HEI graduates. From this data it can be inferred that HE in FE does not

systematically lift people to the same economic level as other HE graduates, reinforcing points made earlier about the reproduction of inequality, and that salaries for graduates are currently stagnating. From the statistical evidence available, there is no evidence that HE in FE has an effect on lessening inequality as measured in income, even while it widens participation. In a similar way Brown *et al* (2008: 17) found that the expansion of access to higher education in the UK “has failed to narrow income inequalities even amongst university graduates”. Of course, individual HE in FE graduates may do exceptionally well and some HE in FE courses, such as certain art foundation courses, have very high status. There is no evidence, however, that HE in FE enhances social mobility when measured in terms of the income of graduates. The assertion from Hartley and Groves (2011: 6) that colleges “can play a major role in widening participation and improving social mobility” makes the common conflation and so elides the difference.

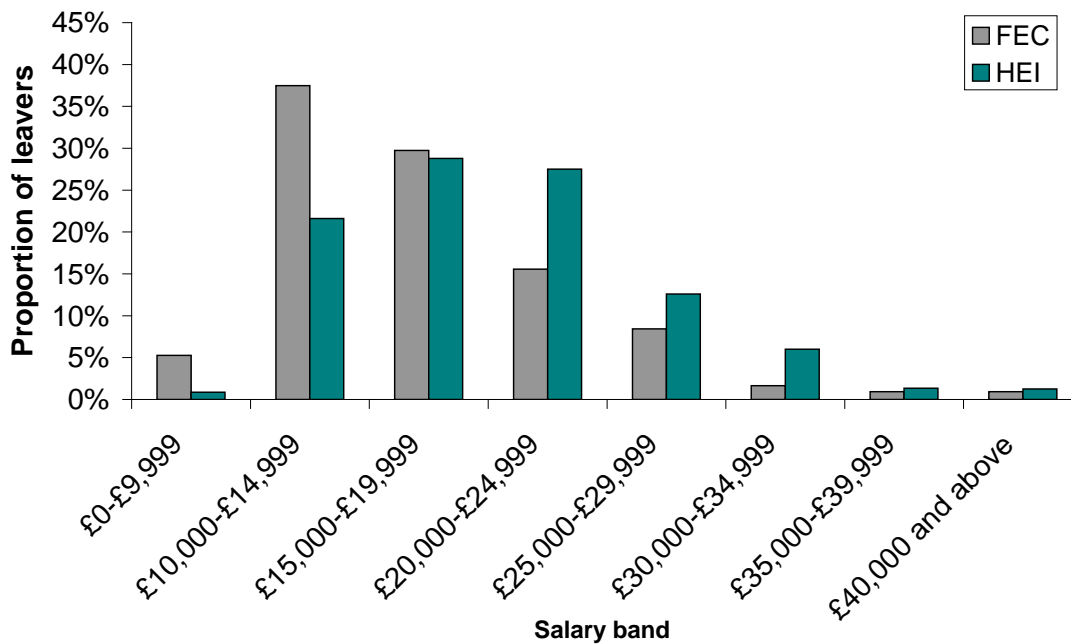


Figure 3: UK-domiciled full-time first degree qualifiers (from English HE providers in 2010-11) in full-time paid UK employment by salary band and institution type six months after graduation (HEFCE, 2013c: 12)

This is not to argue that HE in FE does not have worth, but whatever its use value, its exchange value is less than that for other HE courses. This can implicate HE in FE teachers who strive to improve the life chances of their students, but who cannot do so because of powerful countervailing structural obstacles. The government has been subjecting the FE sector to ever-greater scrutiny and accountability for what cannot be accomplished through education and training alone. So there is a fundamental discrepancy between the government's stated intention for HE in FE, at least in regard to social mobility, and what HE in FE can achieve, no matter how efficient the sector is. Simply put, HE in FE teachers can only fail to achieve social mobility. Clegg points to other dangers within this, which question what social justice means if we reduce it to experiencing the right kind of HE.

Progressive educators practicing (sic) in less elite settings are trapped into a series of promises they cannot realise, while those in elite institutions are largely involved in a logic of reproduction not transformation. In describing and analysing these modes of reproduction it becomes all too easy to conceptualise the capitals minority students bring with them as lacking and thus to lay the blame for continued inequalities at the door of poor schools and families.

(Clegg 2011: 94)

As Clegg goes on to argue for HE generally, this reduction of students to what capital they may bring to the institution must be challenged by emphasising what they do bring, and by emphasising the content of the curriculum so that it is worthwhile. "Thinking about curriculum is essential for a critique of the utilitarianism that underpins much pedagogy" (op cit.). Symptomatic of that utilitarianism is the concept of employability, when there are simply fewer jobs for young people.

Social Justice and Curriculum

'If you work hard enough you can attain your dream'. This is the hope-goading gloss on the other side of sterner neoliberal injunctions, carried in policy and political discourse, that all individuals have responsibility to engage and succeed as lifelong learners in which they flexibly accumulate human capital.

Zipin et al 2013: 6

This vivid description of the implications of human capital-related justifications for social mobility policy, such as widening participation in higher education through college-based courses can be read as a warning. To avoid "hope-goading gloss" there is a need to be clear about the structural obstacles in the way of social mobility and social justice even for those who invest the time and effort into achieving HE qualifications. The assumption that HE necessarily brings rewards needs to be refuted. As Clegg has written:

In policy debates about higher education in the United Kingdom there has been a tendency to treat the definition of future desirable selves as obvious, tied to a rhetoric of employability and, in debates about student financial contribution to higher education, to the obvious advantages of social mobility.

(Clegg 2013: 102)

As this paper has attempted to illustrate, those advantages are illusory for many students because of the differentiated nature of HE in England. What Bourdieu and Passeron wrote about the French education system over forty years ago describes this highly segmented sector.

To grasp the social significance of the different social categories' share in the different faculties or disciplines, one has to take into account the

position this or that faculty or discipline occupies at a given time within the system of faculties or disciplines.

(Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990, 222; original emphasis)

While HE in FE has not achieved and cannot achieve greater social mobility at a macro level, it does, however, expose opportunities and help explain lives for individuals. This brings us beyond “the limited view of equity” to which Gale (2012: 138) referred. One recent graduate from an HE in FE degree who had worked her whole life in a male-dominated industry has described how she now replies to condescending emails with careful argument and quotations from academic texts to support her points. In other words, HE in FE practitioners should focus on the use value of their qualifications rather than on the alienating attempt to achieve parity with HEIs. It also specifically means eschewing the discourse of employability that suggests that unemployment is a result of individual lack rather than structural fault. That the 7 per cent of the population who attended private schools account for 71 per cent of senior judges and 45 per cent of the chairs of public bodies (Milburn 2014) is symbolic of the inequality that no amount of employability training will affect.

This refocusing would entail practitioners examining curriculum and pedagogy and it entails articulation of an understanding of knowledge. What Bathmaker has written about vocational courses applies also to HE in FE, many of which are vocational in any case:

The issue of knowledge is not just a technical question, but relates to questions of equity and justice. If vocational education qualifications are to enable people to gain valuable knowledge and skills, and are to open up opportunities rather than constrain and limit futures, then questions of knowledge in these qualifications, and how these questions are decided, are crucial.

(Bathmaker: 2013: 88)

This may also mean looking beyond the exchange value of credentials to “other types of knowing” (Zipin et al 2013: 10), including that which the students already have through their varied life experiences. Wheelahan’s (2010: 9) discussion of powerful knowledge is also instructive. “The privileged access of the powerful to theoretical abstract knowledge provides them with the ability to mobilize knowledge to think the unthinkable and the not-yet-thought.” If HE in FE has a purpose, it is to attempt to provide access to that type of powerful knowledge. That may not change society, but it might change lives.

Conclusion

This paper has examined official data relating to HE in FE students to try to explain the resilience of college-based provision and the stability of the proportion of HE students in colleges. It has argued that this stability can be best explained by placing HE in FE with a broader educational context and, above all, within the inequality of English society. Just as that inequality is stable, so are the markers of that inequality, including HE in FE, which caters for older, poorer, more disadvantaged students. While widening participation policy may have achieved its aims within a conceptualisation of human capital and up-skilling, widening participation is not the same as social mobility, never mind social justice. Thus, HE in FE does not lessen social or economic disadvantages within a society that it can only reflect and never, alone, transform. Nonetheless, HE in FE can transform lives. That is where college-based practitioners may be best to place their emphasis and so produce courses and curricula that value knowledge and that also may analyse and challenge assumptions about social mobility.

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