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# **Seeking distinction and addressing inequalities: an analysis of new times for college-based higher education in England**

Ann-Marie Bathmaker

## **Abstract**

New and distinctive forms of higher vocational education are growing rapidly across a range of countries, as demonstrated in the 2014 OECD review *Skills Beyond School*. In England, established college-based higher vocational education faces new times in the light of major policy changes during the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – a new Teaching Excellence Framework for higher education, area reviews of further education, and the Sainsbury review of vocational education which has been referred to as a ‘technical and professional education revolution’. This chapter examines these developments in relation to two central themes: seeking distinction and addressing inequalities. The chapter presents an analysis of the evolving nature of college-based HE, and considers this in relation to models of higher vocational education beyond England (German-speaking DACH countries and the USA) to offer a critical consideration of the possibilities and constraints of achieving distinction and addressing inequalities through a newly conceived higher level technical and professional education.

## **Introduction**

This chapter examines new times for English further education (FE) colleges in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, focusing specifically on college provision of higher education. What were once termed ‘non-university’ forms of HE (Teichler 1988) have

long formed part of the landscape of HE, seen as an economically viable means of expanding higher education, as well as widening access to a more diverse population (Osborne 2005). The 2010s have seen intense policy interest among countries across the globe in these more technical and vocational forms of higher level education, as demonstrated in the 2014 OECD review *Skills Beyond School* (OECD 2014).

In England, technical education at all levels is a key priority identified in the 2017 Industrial Strategy White Paper, which declares bold aspirations for the future:

*We want our technical education system to be as prestigious as higher education in this country, and for it to rival the best systems in the world.*  
(HM Government 2017b: 102)

A major policy reform programme for technical education (BIS and DfE 2016a, 2016b) sits alongside significant reforms to the whole of the higher education system, which aim to promote ‘quality, competition, choice and diversity across degree level qualifications’ (BIS, 2016: 26). There is also growing pressure for change to the student funding system for both Bachelor and other forms of higher education (Wolf 2015; 2016). This policy ‘ensemble’ (Ball 1993) has major implications for college HE in England.

### *Overview of chapter*

The first section of the chapter outlines the opportunities and challenges for HE provision that sits at the nexus of HE and VET. The chapter then goes on to present a brief picture of college HE in England at the present time. This is followed by a discussion of policy changes in England in the second half of the 2010s and what issues are raised by these reforms for college HE. Finally, the chapter draws out the implications for distinction and addressing inequalities for colleges in new times.

## Opportunities and challenges at the nexus of higher education and VET

In the 21st century increasing participation in education and training at higher levels is seen as a key mechanism in 'knowledge' economies both to increase national productivity and to raise the economic participation of disadvantaged equity groups (OECD 2012, 2014; Picketty 2014). The development of human capital is deemed vital for individuals and for economies, as emphasized by Becker (2006: 292):

*This is the 'age of human capital' in the sense that human capital is by far the most important form of capital in modern economies. The economic successes of individuals, and also of whole economies, depends on how extensively and effectively people invest in themselves.*

The OECD, in its work on education, stresses human capital as a key driver for tertiary education policy:

*The widespread recognition that tertiary education is a major driver of economic competitiveness in an increasingly knowledge-driven global economy has made high-quality tertiary education more important than ever before. The imperative for countries is to raise higher-level employment skills, to sustain a globally competitive research base and to improve knowledge dissemination to the benefit of society. (OECD 2008: 8)*

However, college HE and higher vocational education are located in an ambiguous in-between space (Bathmaker 2015), at the nexus of separate policy and organizational fields that deal with higher education and vocational education and training (VET) respectively, evident for example in the Bologna (HE) and Copenhagen (VET) processes in the European Union (Powell and Solga 2010), and further evident in the work of the OECD. The OECD's international review of higher level education in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (OECD 2008) was deliberately entitled *Tertiary Education for the Knowledge Society* to embrace a diversified HE system that includes 'new types of

institutions such as polytechnics, university colleges, or technological institutes.’ (OECD 2008: 8) In a more recent report however, published in 2014, these new types of institution form part of a programme of reviews of vocational education and training. This later review focuses explicitly on the world of ‘post-secondary vocational education and training’, with the title *Skills Beyond School*, and the OECD argues that:

*Many professional, technical and managerial jobs require no more than one or two years of career preparation beyond upper secondary level, and some countries have as much as one-quarter of the adult workforce with this type of short-cycle qualification. (OECD 2014: 21)*

While bringing what the OECD calls ‘the hidden world of professional education and training’ (2014: 21) into the public gaze may have important and possibly beneficial effects for the role and status of higher level vocational education, the opportunities and challenges that are created through the shifting positioning of this provision become apparent in research that looks at the evolution of higher vocational education in different countries.

In the 2000s, the possibility of a ‘tertiary moment’ suggested by the OECD report of 2008 was considered in a collection of studies, based on mainly Anglophone countries (Gallacher and Osborne 2005; Layer 2005a; Osborne, Gallacher and Crossan 2004). In a summary of the trends in sub Bachelor college HE (also referred to as short cycle HE) to be found in these studies, Gallacher and Osborne (2005: 196) identify three functions served by college HE: firstly providing vocationally-oriented higher education; secondly, increasing participation in HE, particularly through provision that is closely linked to the needs of employers and business; and thirdly widening participation to groups who have traditionally been under-represented in HE. They caution that much of this provision ‘has traditionally been relatively low status’ (ibid: 195). They also note that there is a tension between the role of short cycle sub-Bachelor HE as an exit

qualification, and alternatively its purpose as a progression route to a full Bachelor degree.

For Layer (2005b: 199) the question is whether such provision can provide both 'equity' and 'excellence'; that is, can college HE meet equity goals of widening participation at the same time as aiming to provide vocationally-oriented HE, whose quality has parity with academic HE. In a comment prescient for current policy in England, Layer is skeptical that these goals can be achieved through market competition: 'If left to market forces there is no clear undertaking that 'equity', 'excellence' or both will be sustainable.' (ibid: 199)

Over the past decade, two significant trends can be discerned that provide insights into the evolving dilemma of equity and excellence raised above. One involves college HE which is distinctive through its focus on widening participation. This is found in particular in the American community colleges and their global counterparts (though it should be acknowledged that these are not all of a piece – see for example Webb et al 2017; Wheelahan 2016). Jephcote and Raby (2012: 350) emphasise the role that these colleges play 'at the forefront of providing educational opportunities for nontraditional students and facilitating their progression into continuing and higher educational options.' They identify key characteristics of this provision as serving the local environment, offering a 'second chance' for non-traditional students who have long been excluded from higher education, and providing the only post-secondary education that many students can obtain.

The problem that such institutions face is that in a hierarchically stratified HE system, they become positioned as inferior to university HE (Bathmaker 2016), catering to the mass population, while universities are reinterpreted for the elite. Despite catering for a more diverse population, their success is regularly judged against university HE in terms of student outcomes - the level and number of qualifications gained, and the numbers progressing to and completing degree-level education. Jephcote and Raby

(2012: 361) comment that: 'These are harsh ways of judging the performance of a sector which embraces those from non-traditional and disadvantaged backgrounds, who have greater obstacles to overcome.'

The second trend involves the growth of distinctive and prestigious forms of higher vocational education. These have historically occurred in dual systems (Scott 1995) that have a clearly separate field of VET, but now involve the introduction of hybrid forms of work-based academic education, which combine elements of vocational training and higher education, often in new hybrid institutions. This trend has been a key development in the German-speaking DACH countries (Germany, Austria and Switzerland), where there is a strong tradition of commitment from employers working in partnership with education. Graf's (2013) detailed analysis of these developments concludes that these new hybrid institutions 'signify a new premium sector, for example in terms of social prestige and labor market prospects' (ibid: 17). The challenge however, found both here (Baethge and Wolter 2015) as well as in analogous systems in other European countries such as Denmark (see for example Jørgensen 2017), is that the development of prestigious, hybrid programmes makes equity goals more difficult. Their prestige and distinction may serve to attract into vocational HE those who might have pursued university HE, but this can be to the disadvantage of learners who previously followed these vocational routes, leading to competitive selection processes that do not favour those who benefit from open access widening participation practices.

The next section of the chapter now turns to college HE in England and offers a brief statistical picture of college-based HE in the 2010s. What this picture suggests is that the distinctiveness of college HE in England is closely intertwined with its role in addressing inequalities through providing wider access to HE, progression routes to Bachelor level, and serving local communities including mature students. In this, it is much more in line with the community college model outlined above than the distinctive and specialist models which are developing in German-speaking countries. Where the former, including the introduction of the short cycle Foundation degree, was

possibly the preferred direction of travel in the 2000s as part of the New Labour Government's (1997-2010) widening participation policies, UK policymakers in the current Conservative Government appear keen to emulate the dual specialist model exemplified by the DACH countries, through a distinct and separate route and the introduction of new National Colleges and Institutes of Technology which are explained further below.

## **College HE in England in the 2010s**

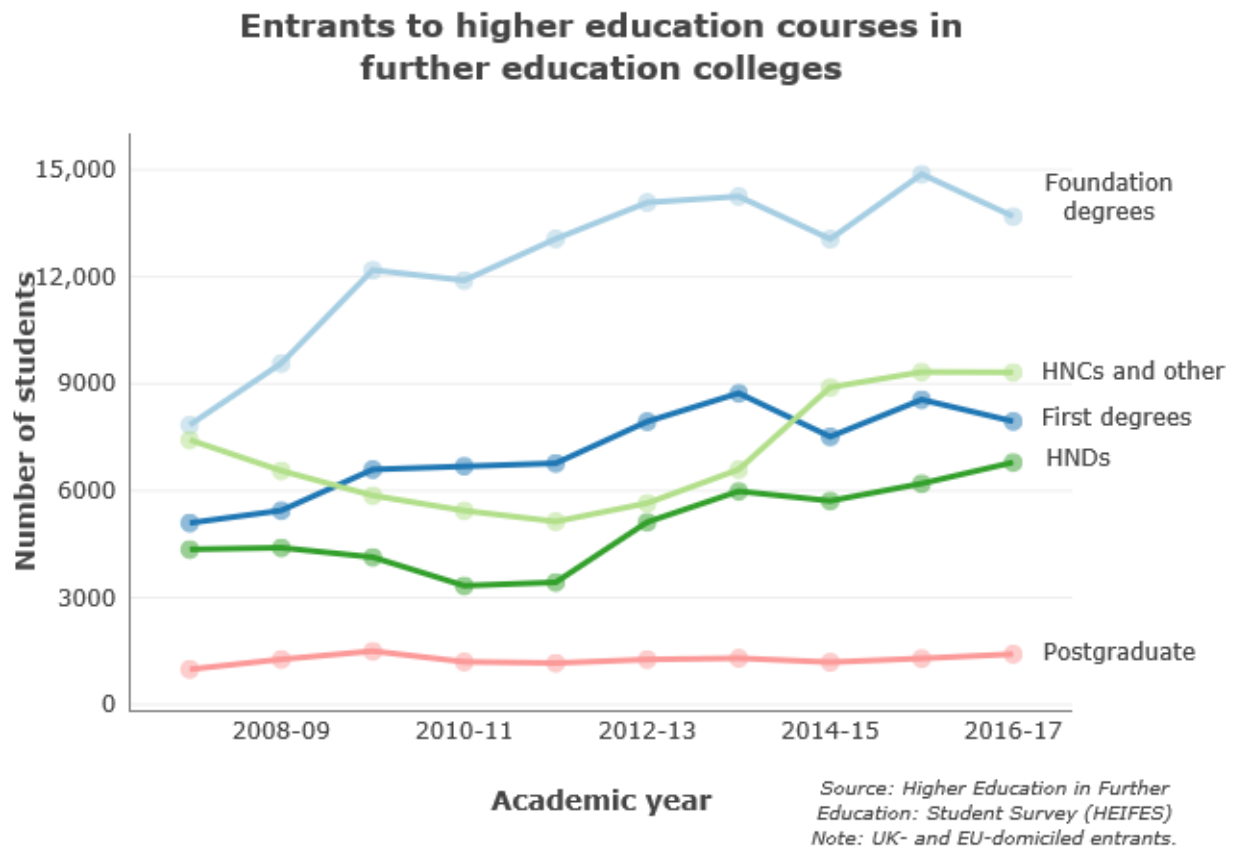
College provision of HE forms an enduring element of the work of FE colleges in England, which can be traced back over more than 60 years. In 2017-18, 218 out of 288 colleges offered HE (AoC 2017)<sup>1</sup>, though provision in most colleges is quite small (less than 100 students), and there are only a limited number of large providers of HE. The college contribution represented just under 10% of all HE in England in 2015/16 (ETF and RCU 2017: 5). Since the early 2000s this college contribution has been positioned in policy as playing two important roles: providing higher level vocational education that connects closely to workplace requirements, and widening participation to those traditionally under-served or excluded from HE (BIS 2011a, 2011b). But provision is very diverse; it is not exclusively higher *vocational* education and it includes a range of programmes at different levels, including sub-Bachelor qualifications (such as Foundation degrees and Higher National Diplomas) and full Bachelor degrees (as shown in Figure 1), as well as higher and degree apprenticeships.

It is at the same time distinctive in comparison to university HE in a number of ways: colleges offer more opportunities for sub-degree study, they provide part-time study, and they cater for more students from local areas with low HE participation rates, as well as older students.

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<sup>1</sup> 73 of the 288 colleges in England are 6<sup>th</sup> form colleges, many of which are unlikely to offer HE courses.

Figure 1: Numbers of entrants to higher education courses in further education colleges in England from 2008-09 to 2016-17



Source: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/HEinEngland/providers/colleges/>

Accessed 4 November 2017

In 2015-16 over half of all students in college HE (56%) were taking sub-Bachelor qualifications; foundation degrees represented over 40% of participation and a further 16% were studying for either Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) or Higher National Certificates (HNCs) (ETF and RCU 2017: 17). By comparison, Bachelor provision comprised 30% of full-time and only 4% of part-time numbers in the same period (ETF and RCU 2017: 12). Alongside these courses, higher level apprenticeship programmes have grown in size, with numbers doubling from just over 7,000 in 2013/14 to more

than 16,000 in 2015/16 (though higher level and degree apprenticeships still only accounted for 5% of all apprenticeships).

Despite a collapse in part-time numbers (between 2008-09 and 2012-13 numbers fell by 134,000), colleges continue to be important providers of part-time courses. In 2015/16 out of the total of 151,360 HE students in FE colleges, just under half were part-time students. Amongst full-time students, just over half (53%) were registered for a sub-Bachelor degree (37.8% Foundation degrees; 15% HNDs), but a much smaller proportion (19.3%) amongst those studying part-time (15.5% Foundation degrees; 3.7% HNDs).

Colleges recruit on average more than 78% of their HE students from the local region, and a considerable proportion of these live in HE 'cold spot' areas. In 2015/16 over 16,000 college full time HE students lived in cold spot areas, representing more than a fifth of the total full time cohort, with just under a fifth (19%) of part-time HE students coming from 'cold spots' (ETF and RCU 2017: 8-9). A further area of distinctiveness involves the participation of older students. The majority of part-time students and just over a third of full-time students studying HE in FE colleges were aged 25 or over in 2015/16 (ETF and RCU 2017: 6). However, these areas of distinctiveness are also areas of uncertainty and risk for colleges. There is a long term decline in the numbers taking sub-bachelor level qualifications, and more recently a stark decrease in the number of part-time students.

## **The changing policy environment**

In the late 2010s, the policy landscape is one of radical change, and the position of college HE at the nexus between higher and vocational education (Powell and Solga 2010) means that college provision faces reform not just as a result of HE policy, but what Ball (1993) refers to as an 'ensemble' of related policies. This ensemble constitutes a combination of HE reforms, technical education reforms, changes to student funding, and area reviews of FE colleges.

In 2016 a *Post-16 Skills Plan* (BIS and DfE 2016b), which focuses on technical education, and a White Paper *Success as a Knowledge Economy* (BIS 2016), which introduces higher education reforms, were published within two months of each other, proposing a ‘technical education revolution’ (Greening 2017), alongside a shake-up of the whole higher education system. At the same time as the reforms put forward in these policy documents, a series of area reviews of post-16 education provision in England took place between 2015 and 2017. In a context of ever tighter government funding, with colleges facing severe financial difficulties, these reviews involved a new phase of FE college mergers, intended to create ‘fewer, often larger, more resilient and efficient providers’ (BIS 2015: 3). One of the suggested ways in which colleges were encouraged to envisage their future involved ‘A more significant role in supporting skills development at level 4 and beyond’ (FE Commissioner letter 2015).

The technical strand of reform follows the recommendations of a review led by Lord Sainsbury into technical education (BIS and DfE 2016a) and endorsed in the government’s Post-16 Skills Plan (BIS and DfE 2016b). These reforms introduce two distinct and separate routes post-16: a technical and an academic option. According to the Plan:

*The technical option will prepare individuals for skilled employment which requires technical knowledge and practical skills valued by industry. (2016b: 7)*

While current attention is focused on new ‘T levels’ offered in 15 occupational areas that are intended to be equivalent to academic ‘A levels’, the technical option is projected to extend through to levels 4, 5 and 6 (equivalent to ISCED levels 5 and 6). The plans for these higher levels are however much less clear, with a further review, announced by the Department for Education at the end of October 2017<sup>2</sup>. The higher levels do not involve new qualifications in the first instance. A new Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education will keep a register of qualifications at levels 4 and 5 that are

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/level-4-5-technical-education-to-be-reviewed>

deemed eligible for public subsidy (such as student loans), and to begin with, the Plan explains, they will be drawn from ‘existing technical qualifications which are considered to do the best job of meeting national standards.’ (BIS and DfE 2016b: 26) As with other levels in the technical option, these higher levels include work-based apprenticeships, as well as college-based programmes, with higher level apprenticeships intended to form part of the 3 million apprenticeship starts promised by 2020 (BIS 2015b).

For college HE these changes to qualifications pathways are not the only significant change. Two new types of institutions offering higher technical education - National Colleges and Institutes of Technology - have been introduced. National Colleges were first proposed under the previous government in a speech by Vince Cable in 2014 (Cable 2014), and five colleges came into operation in 2017, each specializing in one key sector: nuclear, digital skills, high-speed rail, onshore oil and gas, and the creative and cultural industries. The Skills Plan states that these colleges will ‘lead the design and delivery of technical skills training at levels 4–6’ in their specialist area (BIS and DfE 2016b: 34).

Institutes of Technology (IoTs) on the other hand were first put forward in 2015 in the Productivity Plan published by HM Treasury (HM Treasury 2015), which proposed that some existing FE colleges would be invited to become IoTs and specialize in providing higher level technical education in areas of local economic priority. The Skills Plan confirmed the introduction of IoTs, stating that they were looking for collaborative ventures that would involve ‘innovative ways of working across higher education, further education, private providers and industry.’ (BIS and DfE 2016b: 35) The subsequent Institutes of Technology prospectus (Department for Education 2017), states that IoTs will be: ‘A prestigious and high quality employer-led institution delivering higher level technical education with a clear route to high skilled employment.’ (DfE 2017: 6)

Turning to the HE part of the policy ensemble, reforms here centre around the proposals announced in the 2016 White Paper on higher education *Success as a Knowledge Economy* (BIS 2016). They introduce wide-ranging changes to the HE system as a whole, including significant developments that affect college HE. Central to the White Paper is 'creating a competitive market', with 'greater choice' at 'lower cost', and with 'greater competition between high quality new and existing providers in the HE sector.' (BIS 2016: 8)

The new Office for Students creates a single regulator for the whole HE sector, replacing both the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Office for Fair Access. The new regulator's work will include the HE work of further education colleges as well as higher education institutions, alternative providers and new entrants (BIS 2016: 63). This, it is claimed, will create 'a level playing field for all providers' (ibid: 24) in order to create greater competition.

The White Paper proposes much greater flexibility to gain degree awarding powers for both foundation and bachelor degrees, and awarding powers granted for specific rather than all subjects. Furthermore, the Paper promotes the development of different modes of study to the traditional three and four year Bachelor degree, including a two year accelerated Bachelor degree; studying part time; in modules; from a distance; or in a Degree Apprenticeship, embedded with an employer. Student choice as outlined here thus involves a further range of options for HE study, in addition to choosing between the technical and academic options proposed in the Post-16 Skills Plan. To fund HE study, maintenance loans as well as tuition fee loans are to be made available for part-time as well as full-time study, in order to tackle the long-term decline in part-time numbers.

There is a further dimension to this policy ensemble, which highlights the considerable tension between these parallel but separate reforms to higher education and vocational/technical education. There is increasing pressure from key policy

influencers, most prominently Lord Sainsbury and Baroness Wolf, who advance the argument that too much emphasis has been placed on the expansion of Bachelor level HE, at too great a cost and with diminishing labour market returns to individuals. Wolf in particular has published a series of reports (Wolf 2015; 2016) which argue that financial incentives and administrative structures wrongly promote bachelor degrees at the expense of higher level vocational education:

*In post-19 education, we are producing vanishingly small numbers of higher technician level qualifications, while massively increasing the output of generalist bachelors degrees and low-level vocational qualifications. We are doing so because of the financial incentives and administrative structures that governments themselves have created, not because of labour market demand, and the imbalance looks set to worsen yet further. We therefore need, as a matter of urgency, to start thinking about post-19 funding and provision in a far more integrated way. (Wolf 2015: 76)*

Elsewhere concerns about funding have become highly visible in relation to HE tuition fees, and in February 2018 the Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May announced a year-long review of tertiary education in response to concerns about graduate debt and returns to their education:

*Making university truly accessible to young people from every background is not made easier by a funding system which leaves students from the lowest-income households bearing the highest levels of debt, with many graduates left questioning the return they get for their investment.*

## **What are the prospects for college HE?**

While there is a policy drive through technical education reform to address once again the long-standing problems facing vocational education in England, the policy debate over HE, including college HE, is currently waged almost exclusively on the terrain of

the demand for higher level and graduate skills, the returns to higher level qualifications, and therefore which forms of HE are worth investing in for government and for individuals. In the wider socio-economic context this connects to major concerns about the UK's 'longstanding productivity deficit compared to other advanced economies' (Anderson and Education Policy Institute 2017: 17) and in the light of the UK's imminent exit from the European Union, what is viewed as a productivity crisis. For college HE, there are considerable risks and uncertainty in this context, which are intensified by the determined drive to promote market competition by the Conservative Government.

A key objective for the programme of post-16 area-based reviews of college provision was to ensure: 'Clear, high quality professional and technical routes to employment, alongside academic routes, which allow individuals to progress to high level skills valued by employers' (BIS 2015: 2). What is not clear however is what is meant by 'high level skills', particularly ones that are 'valued by employers', and this matters. For while there are regular claims of increasing labour market demand for high skills (Anderson and Education Policy Institute 2017), there are conflicting prognoses for the future of intermediate, middle-skilled jobs.

Sissons (2011) and Holmes and Mayhew (2012) talk of an hour-glass economy, with an increasing polarisation of the UK labour market since the 2008 recession and the hollowing-out of middle-wage jobs. Sissons points out that although the economy has begun to create jobs, a significant number of these have been in low-wage occupations (elementary occupations and sales and customer services), and at the top end with professional growth, but there is declining employment among middle-wage occupations.

This analysis contrasts with reports that forecast job redesign and pockets of opportunity within sectors including agriculture, skilled trades and construction (Bakhshi et al 2017). These differing analyses of the labour market along with

ambiguous definitions of ‘higher skills’ ‘below graduate level’ are played out in UK policy. The Industrial Strategy Green Paper (2017) claims:

*We have a shortage of **high-skilled technicians below graduate level**.*

*Reflecting the historic weakness of technical education in the UK, only 10% of adults hold technical education as their highest qualification, placing us 16th out of 20 OECD countries. (HM Government 2017a: 38)*

Yet HEFCE, the (former) funding council for HE in England, states that there is:

*considerable confusion in the marketplace as to what intermediate technical skills are, how they are of value in the current economy, and, perhaps most importantly, how they will be of value in the future.*

*Employers and stakeholders – but mainly the former – exhibit uncertainty as to what intermediate technical education is, and what its value is to them.*

*(HEFCE 2016b: 10)*

In addition to questions about the demand for higher level skills, there are issues concerning the returns to different levels of skill. Here too there are differing ways in which the available evidence can be viewed. The DfE reported in 2016 that the returns to a ‘high’ skills qualification in England appeared to be declining:

*‘The median earnings five years post graduation for those graduating in 2003/04 was £26,000 compared to £25,500 for those who graduated in 2008/9.’  
(DfE, 2016: 10)*

*‘1 in 4 graduates from 2003/4 was earning £20,000 or less ten years after graduation.’ (DfE, 2016: 11)*

However, the lifetime benefit associated with studying for different types of qualifications reported in by the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS

2011c) showed that the premium for obtaining a Bachelor degree, compared with a Foundation degree and other forms of HE was as follows:

**Table 1: Lifetime benefit associated with studying for different types of qualification**

| Degree level      | Net present value |
|-------------------|-------------------|
| Bachelor degree   | £108,121          |
| Foundation degree | £51,402           |
| HE diploma        | £69,465           |
| Other HE          | £31,611           |

In addition to these pressures related to demand for skills and returns to qualifications, college HE is further affected by a determined commitment to market-led reform in all spheres of current UK policy as emphasized in the Industrial Strategy White Paper (HM Government 2017: 21):

*We believe in the power of the competitive market - competition, open financial markets, and the profit motive are the foundations of the success of the UK. Indeed the best way to improve productivity is to increase exposure to competition.*

Market-led reforms for higher and technical education mean that further education colleges are not necessarily the provider of choice or the preferred provider for any developments, whether that be college-based sub-bachelor higher level education or higher and degree apprenticeships. They are part of an increasingly crowded higher education market place (Saichaie and Morphew 2014), where government higher education policy looks to 'alternative' providers, which include new and private

providers as well as existing further education colleges, while technical education policy introduces Institutes of Technology and National Colleges (DBIS 2016).

### **What are the implications for distinction and addressing inequalities?**

Under New Labour (1997-2010), further education colleges were intended to play a role in widening participation through distinctive forms of sub-Bachelor degree provision, but also with an emphasis on the opportunity for progression to a full Bachelor degree. A key strength of college HE at this time was permeability and progression, allowing successful movement between more academic and more vocationally-oriented routes, and between college-based HE and provision in higher education institutions. When the Coalition Government came to power in 2010, policies of widening participation and 'college for all' leading to Bachelor degrees came under critical scrutiny. Since the election of a Conservative Government in 2015, key policy proposals for technical education reform (BIS and DfE 2016a, 2016b) on the one hand, and plans to increase market competitiveness in the higher education sector (BIS 2016) on the other, suggest a shift in the role and purpose of college HE in the eyes of national policy makers. Firstly, colleges are potentially central to a new technical education pathway that is distinct and separate from an 'academic' pathway, and provides a route through from the lowest level of qualification to graduate and post-graduate levels (BIS and DfE 2016b). Secondly, there has been a shift in emphasis in HE policy, from open access policies of widening participation, intended to open up higher education to those groups underserved by traditional university education, to a focus on (labour) market mobility, whereby choice of higher level provision is to be determined by market demand, and success judged by the labour market returns to qualifications.

So how are questions of distinction and addressing inequalities likely to fare in the context of policy imperatives that focus on markets, competition and choice? In a marketised system of HE, policies that prioritise competition and require 'choice' encourage hierarchies of distinction, and in the hierarchically stratified field of HE,

‘distinction’ is likely to remain determined by more powerful ‘academic’ players, leading to vertical stretching of stratification (Marginson 2016), rather than increased parity through distinction for both academic and higher vocational forms of HE. The diversity of college HE in England can be seen as evidence of how colleges have sought to position themselves in the context of a regularly shifting policy landscape, by changing and adjusting their offer rather than limiting themselves to a specific and distinctive vocational role.

Nevertheless, as in the past, colleges in England will continue to mediate policy. While their work is necessarily affected by strategic decisions concerning funding and financial viability, how they mediate policy is also affected by the way they decide to construct their mission in relation to widening participation and the needs of the communities they serve (Avis and Orr 2016: 51). These different drivers suggest colleges are likely to continue to offer a diversity of HE provision, which addresses inequalities through catering to a diversified population, but which may also involve new, distinctive higher vocational provision, in response to current policy reforms. What is likely to prove more elusive is a technical education revolution that resolves the long-standing and complex problems for colleges in England of labour market demand for higher level vocational education, the returns to these qualifications, and the dominant place of academic provision.

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