

Centre for Global Higher Education working paper series

Intersectoral relationships within higher education: the FE/HE interface in the UK

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Working paper no. 70
June 2021

Published by the Centre for Global Higher Education,
Department of Education, University of Oxford
15 Norham Gardens, Oxford, OX2 6PY
www.researchcghe.org

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ISSN 2398-564X

The Centre for Global Higher Education (CGHE) is an international research centre focused on higher education and its future development. Our research aims to inform and improve higher education policy and practice.

CGHE is a research partnership of 10 UK and international universities, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, with support from Office for Students and Research England.

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Abstract

This study seeks to understand the interface between further education colleges and universities in the UK. Its findings, based on a response rate of 45% of FE colleges, shows that 89% of colleges have formal links with at least one university; 95 universities, more than 50% of the UK's universities, had formal agreements in respect to individual joint activities. The study reports in total and by regions the joint activities and the fields of study which these links cover and the cumulative student numbers engaged in each type of joint activity. The findings raise significant issues as to the extent to which higher education policies in the UK should be tertiary based rather than conceived as the product of two separate sectors. Wales has already adopted a tertiary system of education and Scotland is moving in that direction but England retains a two sector approach. The paper suggests that the evidence provided points to there being strong arguments for policy integration rather than separation and that this should be best undertaken on a regional rather than a centralised basis.

Keywords: Further Education; Higher Education; Universities; Progression; Validation; Apprenticeship

Acknowledgment: The formation of this working paper took place in the ESRC/OFSRE Centre for Global Higher Education, funded by the U.K. Economic and Social Research Council (award numbers ES/M010082/1, ES/M010082/2 and ES/T014768/1).

Introduction

The position of post-secondary education vis a vis higher education can be an issue of policy tension in many national systems, whether they operate as separate sectors with their own policy agendas or are brought together in one collaborative sector. The UK offers alternative approaches: thus Wales has opted for a tertiary system bringing post-secondary and higher education under one policy roof, and Scotland seems to be moving in that direction as well, while England maintains a dual sector approach with separate policy drivers for each sector.

A note on terminology is perhaps appropriate here in that in the UK the primary institutions in post-secondary non-higher education are the Further Education colleges (FECs) whose role is not unlike community colleges in North America, although their feeder role into higher education is not so clearly recognised. FECs grew up under local education authorities (LEAs) (and provided the seed bed for the creation of the polytechnics back in 1967) but in 1993 they were incorporated, removed from LEA control and given independent legal status. Since then their progress has substantially depended on their recruitment market: they offer courses for 16 year olds and above for GCSE, for technological and professional qualifications and for a range of other intermediate courses but as a sector they have taken very much a second place to higher education both in funding and in status. In effect there are two markets in operation, one in FE and the other in HE. Our study is about where and how they intersect and the extent to which this opens a new integrated policy arena.

In November 2019 when our research began the Association of Colleges listed 294 colleges across the UK distributed as follows: England 248; Scotland 26; Wales 14; Northern Ireland 6. Since incorporation the sector has engaged in a wave of mergers bringing the total number of colleges down from a figure of more than 450; this process continued during the period of our research. We found that the obvious sources of data about the colleges, the Department for Education (DfE), the Association of Colleges (AoC) and the Office for Students (OfS) did not include material which enabled judgements to be made as to the interface that existed between FE and HE. Our research, therefore, was to fill in the gap so as to be able to establish the nature of the interface and the extent to which it contributed, if at all, to the policy environments that both sectors shared. The main source of data on the overlap of interests between the FE and HE sectors is the Report prepared for the former Department of Business, Innovation and Skills *Understanding Higher Education in Further Education Colleges* (Parry *et al.* 2012). But this Report was published in 2012 and was based on FE in England alone. Our interest was not to seek to replicate the Report which provided a comprehensive account of FE/HE relationships at that time but to focus specifically on the extent of the interface now, and on the wider UK basis, and to analyse the breakdown of the component activities which contributed to it. We were also anxious to concentrate on activities which arose from direct and continuing partnership arrangements in order to establish the degree to which these activities were integral to the strategies of both the colleges and the universities involved.

Part way through the data gathering process the UK Government published two important policy documents in regard to the future of the FE sector in England: the

White Paper *Skills for jobs: lifelong learning for opportunity and growth* (Department for Education 2021) and a Policy Paper *Build Back Better: our plan for growth* (. (H.M. Treasury 2021). The first sought to prioritise investment in FE chiefly in respect to capital and facilities, the latter reversed the national Industrial Strategy developed by the previous government but put FE into a service capacity role to support an anticipated growing economy. Both described the FE sector as an independent entity within the education system and designated its prime function to be to provide the skills base for industry and commerce to flourish. This suggests a more restricted remit than the present set of functions which it covers. The evidence from this study offers some corrective to this perspective.

We considered the joint activities which we would examine to define the nature of the interface between institutions of the two sectors and decided on the following:

- The extent of exclusive relationships between individual colleges and universities;
- Multi progression of students under partnership or other arrangements between colleges and universities;
- Franchising agreements between universities and colleges;
- Validation agreements between universities and colleges;
- Agreements between colleges and universities for the extension of apprenticeship programmes into degree work

The Research Methodology

The approach adopted was to attempt a UK coverage of the sector by seeking a response from every operating FE college that could be identified. This would *perforce* capture national and regional variations but also offer the most likely means of maximising the representativeness of any eventually returned sample. A total of 294 FE colleges in the UK were identified from the Association of Colleges (AoC) November 2019 lists of UK colleges. There were 248 English college; 26 Scottish; 14 Welsh; and six Northern Irish. An additional seven colleges were added as potential participants. It is worth noting that the November 2019 AoC total of 248 English colleges had by February 2021 become 231

(<https://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/237%20colleges%20in%20England.pdf>).

The reduction is due to the ongoing process of mergers across the FE sector. This impacted on the data gathering exercise as some of the colleges listed in 2019 ceased to exist independently during 2020, e.g. Morley College and Kensington and Chelsea College merged on 3 February 2020 to become Morley College London.

The survey instrument was developed to capture the five differing types of formal arrangements further education colleges and degree awarding institutions (principally universities): student progression (distinguishing between exclusive and multiple arrangements); franchised teaching; validation of courses; and apprenticeship degrees. In each case the relevant institution(s) subjects and student numbers (total and full time) were requested for the period 2017/18. The subjects were presented as a drop-down menu according to the Joint Academic Coding

System 3.0 (JACS) principal subject coding:

<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/support/documentation/jacs>.

The survey was conducted on the basis that the data was not attributed to individual institutions; identification was requested only at the level of the institution. The instrument and survey design was approved by the UCL IOE Ethics Committee in early 2020. It was administered through Opinio software, whereby the responses would then be entered directly into a database.

Contact details (name, email address) for each FE college were initially sourced from the UK Register of Learning Providers (<https://www.ukrlp.co.uk/ukrlp/ukrlp.first>).

Subsequently alternative contacts for all non-replying colleges were sought by contacting each college directly and requesting details of the individual(s) charged with the college's higher education responsibilities. The survey was administered to each college by email beginning in June 2020, and four reminders were sent to colleges that had not so far responded. The subsequent alternative contacts were then sent invitations to participate, and three further reminders sent. The administration of the survey concluded in December 2020. It should be noted the period June to December saw Covid-19 lockdown restrictions eased in from June onwards, then reimposed from September onwards, reimposed through the UK and national devolved governments. A timeline of the restrictions' imposition/ removal are available in the following document:

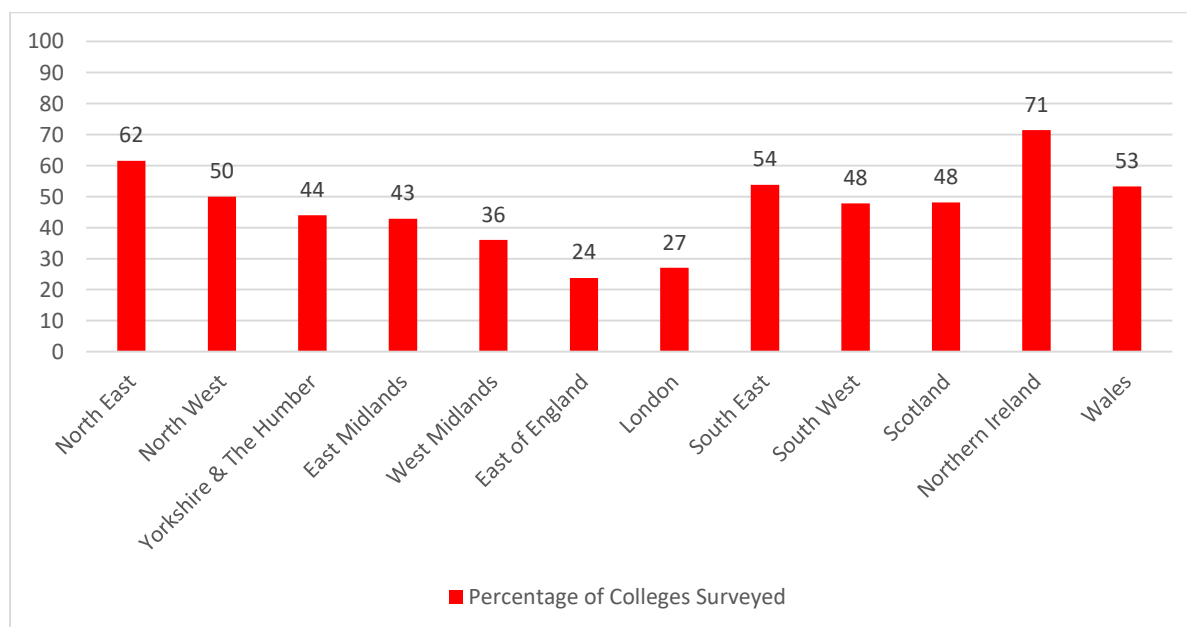
<https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwiPhKD6vMHwAhWPFxQKHf1ZC0sQFjAAegQIAhAD&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.i>

[nstituteforgovernment.org.uk%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Ftimeline-lockdown-web.pdf&usg=AOvVaw1w270JQv1v3Z0D4BVL-vT5](https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/timeline-lockdown-web.pdf&usg=AOvVaw1w270JQv1v3Z0D4BVL-vT5)

The survey returned 130 separate responses, representing 43% of the total number of colleges originally listed in 2019, or 45% of those identified as active by the conclusion of the survey.

We believe that this response rate represents an adequate basis on which to draw conclusions about the inter relationship between the two sectors. It is reinforced at the regional level by Figure 1 which shows a broadly common percentage of responses by region falling significantly below 45% only in three regions.

Figure 1: Percentage of Total Colleges Surveyed by UK Region



The research findings

1. The breadth of the interface—FE

The headline figure is that 89% of the 130 colleges responding which made valid returns indicated that they had joint arrangements or direct partnerships with at least one university: only 13 (11%) indicated they did not. This compares with a figure of 82% (245 out of around 300) of English colleges having indirect funding relationships with higher education institutions reported in Parry *et al.*, (2012). The spread of joint activities, shown in Table 1, was as follows:

Table 1: The Number of Joint Activities and Direct Partnerships Undertaken in FE Colleges (n = 106)

Type of Joint Activity	Frequency
Exclusive links	10
Multiple links	61
Franchising	50
Validation	63
Apprenticeship	23

The relatively low numbers of apprenticeship courses is probably a result of their recent introduction (2017) and that only colleges identified as FE and HE are likely to be able to offer access to such degree courses (*All About School Leavers 2020*).

2. The breadth of the interface—HE

Ninety-five universities, more than half of all UK universities, are involved in joint activities and direct partnerships with FE colleges.

Table 2: Frequency and Percentage of Universities by Type with Formal Links to FE Colleges

University Type	Frequency	Percent
Russell Group	19	5
Pre-1992 Non-Russell Group	76	21
Post-1992 universities	181	49
Post-post-1992 universities	93	25
Private	1	>1

Table 2 shows a much greater involvement of post-1992 universities with FE colleges than the rest (the smaller figure for post-post-1992 universities is probably a reflection of the number of universities in this category and their subject spread).

There may be several explanations:

- (a) In a competitive recruitment market pre-1992 universities are less likely to need relationships with FE colleges to meet their admission targets;
- (b) Applicants to university via FE colleges are more likely to be older, to be locally based and intending to live at home and to apply later in the UCAS year than applicants to pre-1992 universities;
- (c) Historically the post-1992 universities, when they were polytechnics, had much closer relationships with FE colleges than pre-1992 universities.

Comparison with data in Parry et al., (2012) suggests that since 2012 the number of pre-1992 universities in England entering partnership arrangements with colleges has increased significantly.

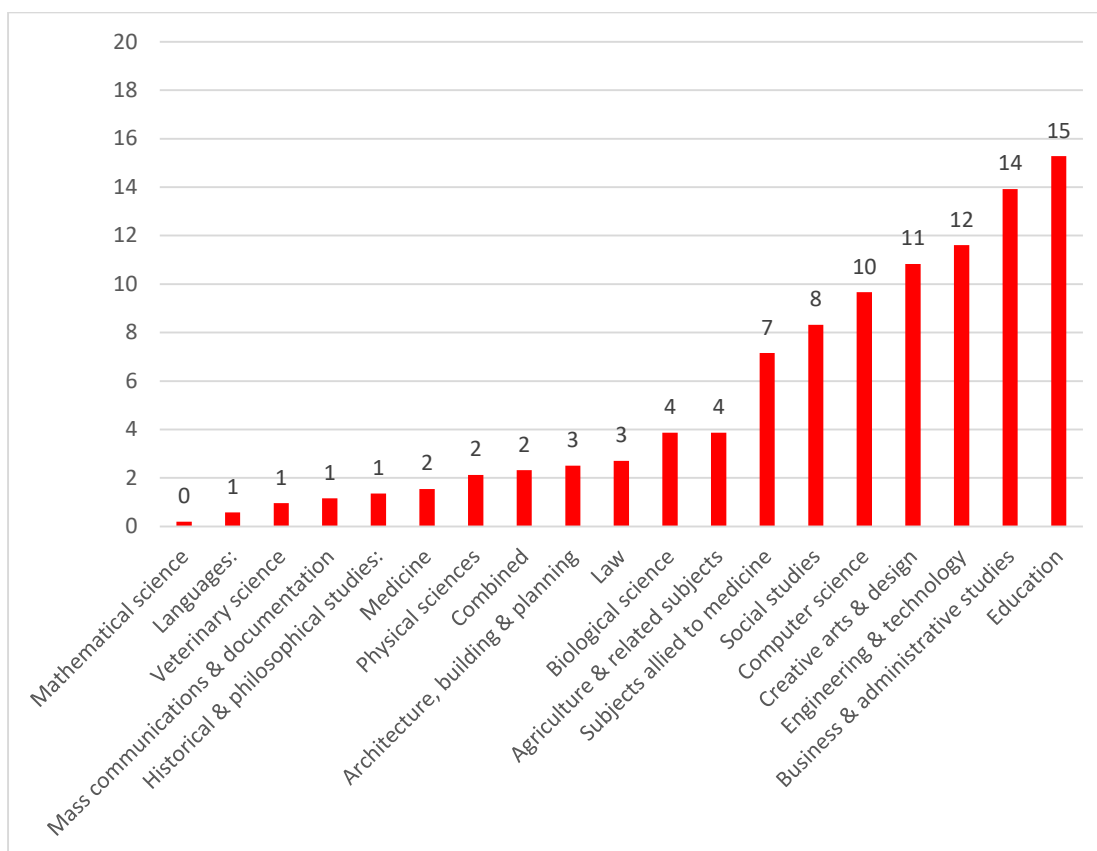
3. Subjects covered by joint activities and partnership arrangements between FE and HE

The disciplinary spread in colleges supports the largely vocational image of the FE sector: STEM subjects comprise 36% of the joint activities—Engineering and Technology, Computer Science, Medicine and subjects allied to medicine and Physical and Biological Sciences. If other obviously vocational subjects like Business and Administrative Studies and Education (teacher training) were included the figure would rise to 65%. However, this does not convey the particularity of some of the programmes. For example, Agriculture, although the numbers of links between colleges and universities are comparatively small, their contribution to education in Agriculture for the agricultural labour market is considerable. Creative Arts and Design, which as demonstrated in Table 3 and Figure 2 represents one of the most frequently taught subjects, does not fit straightforwardly into a vocational profile. In fact, its importance lies in the college diploma qualification that gives students an indication of whether they should continue in this field into higher education and represents a key entry point to a career in the creative industries. The subject Education might also be thought to be anomalous if the sector was to be restructured to concentrate on providing the skills for industry and commerce.

Table 3: Frequency of Subjects Covered by Joint Activities and Partnerships

Subject	Exclusive and Multiple progression arrangements	Franchising	Validation	Apprenticeship
Medicine	7		1	
Subjects allied to medicine	13	10	12	1
Biological science	10	2	9	
Veterinary science	2		3	
Agriculture & related subjects	10	2	7	1
Physical sciences	5	4	2	
Mathematical science	0	1		
Computer science	23	7	16	2
Engineering & technology	27	6	16	10
Architecture, building & planning	5	3	5	
Social studies	21	7	14	
Law	7	2	5	
Business & administrative studies	29	16	19	8
Mass communications & documentation	3	1	2	
Languages:	2		1	
Historical & philosophical studies:	5	1	1	
Creative arts & design	25	9	19	
Education	25	26	24	2
Combined subjects	5	4	3	

Figure 2: Percentage of Subjects Across All Formal Arrangements between FE and HE Institutions



4. Regional/national variations in organisational arrangements

Table 4 sets out the variation in numbers of joint activities by region; Table 5 shows the percentages of each set of joint activities by region/country. Amongst the English regions the two regions with the most colleges responding also had the highest numbers of joint activities but the standout figures relate to Scotland which has double the number of student progression (exclusive and multiple) between FE and HE of any English region. (Historically, Scotland has had 20% of its HE activities taught in FE).

Table 4: Total Number and Type of FE HE Joint Activities by UK Region/Country

Region/ Country	Exclusive Progression	Multiple Progression	Franchises	Validation	Apprenticeship	Total
North East	0	5	5	6	1	17
North West	2	18	6	12	4	42
Yorkshire and The Humber	0	5	5	11	1	22
East Midlands	0	6	5	3	0	14
West Midlands	0	16	8	4	2	30
East of England	1	4	3	5	1	14
London	1	11	7	14	0	33
South East	0	28	12	12	6	58
South West	1	8	4	3	1	17
Scotland	3	54	10	5	0	72
Northern Ireland	0	10	4	11	4	29
Wales	2	7	7	2	2	20

Table 5 shows that multiple progression partnerships play proportionally a bigger role in joint activities in the devolved nations than in England. Taken together, Tables 4 and 5 convey the message that collaboration between FE and HE is considerably closer in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland than in England.

Table 5: Percentages of Differing Types of FE HE Joint Activities offered by Colleges by Region/Country

Region/ Country	Number of Colleges	Percentage offering Progression Routes	Percentage offering Franchises	Percentage offering Validation	Percentage offering Apprenticeship
North East	8	25	63	50	13
North West	21	43	24	48	19
Yorkshire & The Humber	11	18	18	55	9
East Midlands	6	67	50	67	0
West Midlands	9	56	67	33	22
East of England	5	40	40	80	40
London	10	60	50	60	0
South East	21	57	38	52	24
South West	11	64	18	18	9
Scotland	13	69	38	31	0
Northern Ireland	5	100	60	100	80
Wales	8	75	38	38	25

An initial assumption of the research was that a significant number of partnerships between colleges and universities would be exclusive. This proved to be wide of the mark: only 10 fully exclusive relationships were recorded in the responses and it is evident that even where colleges have very close links with individual universities they prefer not to tie themselves to a single institution. This, in fact, makes good sense because the subject match may not be identical, students may want a wider choice than for a single university or the college itself may wish to preserve its freedom to take up new opportunities as they arise. The average number of different HE institutions colleges had arrangements with was 2.81 (S.D. 2.69): only 24 colleges (25%) had arrangements with a single HEI, and 39% had no more than two. For comparison Parry *et al.* (2012) suggested that the majority of the 245 English colleges had relationships with only one or two higher education institutions but some had relationships with between three and six.

There are also considerable variations in the organisational forms of the relationships. These include cases where universities have taken a strategic decision to deliberately establish partnerships with a significant number of colleges usually sited in low participation areas (e.g Plymouth and Lincoln Universities), cases where relationships are based on particular subject fields in particular colleges and universities or where a college has merged with a university but preserved its FE programme. The most notable example of this latter arrangement is the University of the Highlands and Islands which is formed out of 13 colleges distributed over the North of Scotland and has full degree awarding powers as well as colleges continuing to teach at FE levels.

5. Student numbers

Returns from 77 colleges out of the 130 responding (27% of the total number in the FE sector) indicated that a total of 30,184 students were involved in their joint activities and direct partnerships with universities. These numbers do not, of course, cover the large number of HE students in colleges not engaged in programmes covered by formal partnership agreements. Scaled up we can estimate that some 111,800 students in the sector are following academic programmes covered by specific partnership agreements.

Table 6: Total Student Number by Type of Joint Activity

Type of Arrangement	Total Student Numbers	Total Full Time Numbers
Exclusive links	405	378
Multiple links	3613	3164
Franchise	4919	3620
Validation	20028	11807
Apprenticeship	1219	714

What is striking is the extent to which the programmes referred to in Table 6 may have become strategically integral to the colleges concerned. Thus five colleges, for example, have over 400 students on franchised programmes and 16 have over 500 studying on university validated programmes; four colleges have over 1,000 students, two in the North West region and one each in Scotland and Wales, following validated courses.

Conclusions

We think that the figures above demonstrate a breadth and depth of interface between colleges and universities which may not be recognised at a national policymaking level. The fact that 89% of colleges responding to us indicating that they had formal academic links with universities and that more than 50% of UK universities were involved makes a serious case for considering relevant policy issues such as widening participation, regional labour market requirements and institutional provision together, and not separately. The FE college curriculum raises particular issues. Our evidence shows how broadly it is spread and suggests that it is almost certainly affected by contextual regional and employment factors. It is clear that colleges should play a key role in providing a skills base for a growing economy but their role in the provision of programmes in Education, the Creative Arts and Design and in the social sciences should not be lost sight of.

A comparison with the findings of a Report by the Higher Education Funding Council in England (HEFCE) in 2009 (Higher Education Funding Council for England 2009) and of Parry *et al.* (2012) in 2012 suggests that the relationship between the FE and HE sectors in England has remained broadly unchanged for a considerable period when much else in the social and economic context of the two sectors has changed. Some pulling together of the threads of policy would appear to be timely.

The data and the economic and geophysical context of Wales and Scotland strongly support moves to tertiary education systems where policies towards higher and further education are closely integrated and where institutions, working in collaboration, can make significant social and economic impacts. Tables 4 and 5 illustrate that their profiles are already different from England's. The position is less clear cut in England because of the diversity of the economic and geophysical profiles of the different regions. Nevertheless, our data, which shows a considerable inter penetration of the two sectors, suggests that steps should be taken to remove policy silos between the two sectors at national level so that inter related policy issues can be addressed. Here the regional context and regional differences are key. We believe that individual regions in England should, as far as their powers permit, be encouraged to move in a tertiary direction. Central solutions will not be effective in realising the strengths of the two sectors in combination nor in releasing the agility in policymaking apparent in institutions operating in a regional context.

This study does not pretend to be comprehensive though we believe our response rate justifies generalisations about the sector as a whole. A future research agenda might include a closer study of the regional context of the particular college/

university interfaces, an analysis of student outcomes, an examination of the colleges' potential to meet the government's targets for vocational education and a review of the variety of organisational forms that these partnerships take.

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