

## **Seamlessness or separation: negotiating further and higher education boundaries in dual sector institutions**

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### **Abstract**

This section explores how the boundary between further and higher education is experienced, mediated and managed by students and staff in ‘dual sector’ further and higher education (FE/HE) institutions. Despite suggestions in the literature on HE and lifelong learning, that a ‘seamless’ system of tertiary education may be desirable and possible, the evidence from the FurtherHigher project suggests that institutions, staff and students treat further and higher education as separate enterprises. This affects the practices of students and tutors in the process of moving between FE and HE. The ‘logic of practice’ found in the FurtherHigher project is related to implicit and explicit awareness of the stratified and differentiated nature of higher education provision, which positions the provision of higher education in ‘dual sector’ institutions relationally to other forms of higher education. While the evidence from the project suggests that ‘FurtherHigher’ institutions are not simply concerned with diverting certain students into higher education study which is perceived to be of lower status, they may define at least some of what they do as providing for lower-achieving students, and this has implications for their own practices in the provision of higher education.

The growth of ‘dual sector’ institutions, which offer what in England would be defined as ‘further’ (post-school, but not necessarily higher level) as well as ‘higher’ education, is one aspect of increasingly differentiated systems of higher education in a number of countries. Gareth Parry’s chapter in this volume (see chapter 2) discusses in some detail how researchers in a number of countries, such as Australia, the USA, Scotland and England, note that duals suggest the

possibility of creating a seamless system of lifelong education which overcomes the boundaries between different sectors in post-secondary education (Doughney, 2000; Gallacher, 2005; Garrod and Macfarlane, 2007; Keating, 2006). A seamless system it is argued might promote social justice, by improving progression into higher education by those traditionally under-represented in HE (Garrod and Macfarlane, 2007).

This chapter focuses on how seamlessness plays out in practice, by considering students' experience of moving across boundaries between further and higher education in 'dual sector' FE/HE institutions. It draws on data from the FurtherHigher Project<sup>1</sup>, which focused on the role of dual sector institutions in widening participation in England. One strand of the project considered the relationship between further and higher education in four exemplar institutions, focusing on the opportunities and practices related to internal transitions.

Fieldwork for the study involved eleven learning sites across the four institutions. 82 students were interviewed during 2006 and 2007, as well as lecturers involved in teaching the students. Students' experiences in two learning sites are referred to in this chapter, one which came closest to seamless internal connections between FE and HE provision and the other where there was strong separation. The focus here is on what students' experience of moving between FE and HE reveals about the possibilities for seamlessness in these two dual sector institutions.

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Notions of seamlessness and duality do not go uncontested in the literature on widening participation. Young (2006) believes that seamlessness focuses on the opportunities for increasing the numbers of learners who can move easily into programmes at any level and from one type of programme to another, to the detriment of understanding the special characteristics of different forms of knowledge. I have argued elsewhere (Bathmaker, 2008; Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009), as does Wheelahan (2009), that duality may mean access to certain forms of (lower status) higher education only. Various researchers across different countries (Gallacher; 2006; Grubb, 2006) note that the latter is associated with lower level resourcing, completion rates, and occupational destinations. Nevertheless, as Cristofoli and Watts (2005) in England, and Grubb (2006) in the USA observe, students would probably not have entered HE at all if their participation had not been in ‘dual sector’ types of provision.

### **Overcoming boundaries through seamlessness**

Of the many boundaries and barriers to HE facing students from non-traditional and diverse backgrounds which have been identified in the literature (see chapter 2 in this volume and also Gorrard et al (2006) for a review of this literature), ‘seamless’ dual sector institutions appear to offer a distinct opportunity compared with other HE institutions to enable students to deal with boundaries related to space and place, and boundaries related to knowledge. Boundaries of space and place refer here to boundaries which turn HE into a more or less alien or familiar world. Such boundaries are therefore not just about the geographical accessibility

of HE provision, but, as Patiniotis and Holdsworth (2005) discuss in their study of HE students staying or leaving home, they are about the ‘ontological security’ that is afforded by familiarity and confidence about space and place. Duality, with the possibility of transition from FE to HE within the same institution, suggests the possibility that HE might be rendered a less alien world.

Knowledge boundaries are here used to mean boundaries between levels and types of knowledge, particularly between theoretical and applied knowledge, or academic and vocational knowledge, and the varying relationship and balance between these different forms of knowledge at different levels of study. Here too, dual sector institutions would appear to be in a position to create connections between FE and HE study which support effective boundary-crossing. In such ways boundaries might no longer represent barriers between FE and HE. The following discussion of FE/HE boundary-crossing in two dual sector institutions in the FurtherHigher project focuses on these two concerns, and contrasts one learning site which appeared to be working towards ‘seamlessness’, with another, where there was strong separation between FE and HE.

### **Attempting ‘seamlessness’: Culinary education at Citygate College**

The culinary education learning site represented a long-standing specialism at Citygate College (a specialist HE institution). Provision ranged from occupational National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), through to Masters degrees. The college offered a Bachelor degree and a two year Foundation degree in Culinary Arts. Just over 20% of students on the FE NVQ3 (28 out of 137) progressed to the

college's degree programmes in 2005/06, suggesting a possible seamless relationship between FE and HE.

Whereas in most sites in the FurtherHigher study there was a strong separation between FE and HE provision, both in terms of geographical location of provision, and different staff teaching on programmes, culinary education at Citygate College was in marked contrast. All levels of culinary education were taught in one location in the college, because of the need for specialist kitchen facilities. This meant that tutors and students on FE and HE programmes shared rooms and resources and sometimes worked within close proximity. FE students would therefore be aware of students doing culinary education in HE. In addition, because the college was a former FE college, most of the 17 staff teaching on the degree programmes had experience of teaching in FE and HE, and five of them continued to do so.

The FE students were therefore familiar with the environment where HE practical work took place. This was their milieu, where they were confident of their knowledge and skills. One of the students described how this confidence carried through into the degree programme, when he had to manage a group preparing main courses in the kitchen during his first year on the degree:

I was the only FDA, ex NVQ. I'm the only one who really knew how to do the cooking like, so I had to be chunked on that section because that was the hardest section [main courses]. So the rest of them - I'm not saying they don't know what they're doing but they haven't got as much experience. (James)

Students' confidence also appeared to be strengthened by the pride they showed in the college. The students we interviewed identified with the college in ways described by Marks (2002) as more typical of students attending 'old' universities:

I thought the College has probably the best reputation in the country - well it does have the best reputation. (Paul, Culinary Education NVQ 3, Citygate College)

They say it's the best one in the country isn't it I think. You've got to have the best haven't you? (Matt, Culinary Education NVQ 3, Citygate College)

The college's reputation matched their aspirations to become chefs, for, as James explained, students dreamed of running their own business:

Well I want, like everyone else, I want my own little place but I just want to work up to somewhere, nice place, head chef or manager, something like that. And then years down the line a little place somewhere. (James, Culinary Education, Citygate)

In the practice context the FE students saw themselves as fitting in readily to a familiar environment. In contrast, students found the difference between theoretical study on the degree and their previous experience in FE much more challenging. On the NVQ programme James explained:

We didn't really get the theory, it's just the odd, probably one lesson a week we did theory, back then that was just to fill in so you could answer the questions at the end of the folders. [...] But now this is a lot of theory so [...] it is quite stressful.

Students were also faced with the demands of academic writing:

we've only been here three days and we've done lots of writing - I got out of the habit of doing that in the last two years but I'll get back into it slowly. James (NVQ 1-3)

They also had to work more independently. Matt explained that on the NVQ 'you'd always do everything in class, you never did anything at home'. Now, James commented:

It's taught different. Last year they went through it all and helped you. This year it felt like they just gave you the papers and you had to figure it out really.

So their confidence in the practice environment did not follow through into more theoretical work. Paul explained that he was:

Nervous, because you don't want to fail but there's always that little niggling thought at the back "what if I fail that exam or fail the coursework" or whatever, just that little tiny voice saying "what if".

HE tutors were aware of the different academic demands of the FE NVQ programme and the degree, and attempted to bridge the boundary between the NVQ and HE study in two ways. Firstly, the college ran a Foundation degree in parallel to the Bachelor programme. The Foundation degree was closely aligned to the Bachelor degree, and it effectively amounted to a form of *streaming* for those with lower prior academic achievement. Secondly, the college ran a one week Academic Bridging Programme during the summer before the start of the degree course. The sessions included work on research skills, note taking, time management, referencing, writing reports and preparing and giving presentations. These efforts at bridging were however rather curious, for the Foundation degree was not run any differently to the Bachelor degree. Moreover, alongside the one week academic bridging programme, the college offered a much longer five week Practical Bridging Course for students from an academic background. One of the

course tutors believed that this discrepancy was because the FE students who progressed to HE would only be those with good GCSE results and, she believed: ‘they don’t find it particularly taxing’ (Mary, CAM 1<sup>st</sup> year co-ordinator), though her comment did not match the perceptions of students above.

### **Constructing separation: BTEC National Sport at East Heath College**

In contrast to culinary education at Citygate College, the BTEC National in Sport at East Heath College was an example of strong internal separation between FE and HE. All of the college’s FE and HE provision was separated geographically, and involved completely different staff. Encouraging students to consider internal progression to HE was little different to considering moving elsewhere, as the BTEC course leader explained:

We have the little bits of the flyers that come over, we’ve had someone from HE introduce themselves and we’ve invited the Sports Science person over and they come and talk to the second years.  
(Laura, course leader)

Moreover, the college’s Foundation Degree in Sport Science was not a viable progression route from the BTEC course, despite the similarity of course title, because:

[The students] need a good science background and a lot of them aren’t necessarily strong on that side of things, which is why we went to a general sort of Sports Development/Fitness [National Diploma].

Progression would only be possible if the FE students took an additional academic science qualification at level 3. While the BTEC National Diploma in Sport was selected to suit the sort of students who attended the FE part of the college, it



appeared that the HE course was aimed at a different market. Perhaps not surprisingly, none of the 19 students on the BTEC programme in 2005/06 progressed to the college's degree in Sport Science.

Instead of encouraging internal transitions, staff helped students to negotiate the boundaries between FE and HE by providing significant support in choosing destinations beyond the college. A lack of family experience in higher education (no students had parents who had experience of higher education, although two students had siblings that had entered HE), meant that students relied on tutors' help. This involved not just guiding them through procedures, but advising them whether a particular course was the right place for a person like them. Jessica explained:

I asked for advice because sometimes you had to go for recommendations and say I'm going to go for this, is it possible? She said "Yes, it's suitable you are able to cope with it." (Jessica, Sport student, East Heath College)

Luke made similar comments about support from his personal tutor:

She has told me where to look and helped me look on some of the sites to find out what courses, and then once I've found them she's gone through and said "Yes, that's the sort of thing you are looking for, that isn't, that is." (Luke, Sport student, East Heath College)

Clearly, the opportunity to take a vocational level 3 course at East Heath college, and the support and advice provided by tutors with students' applications to HE, represented ways in which widening participation in HE was encouraged. But these activities appeared to be untouched by the dual sector nature of the institution. Moreover the different demands of the FE and the HE Sport

qualifications offered by the college turned what might have been a boundary into a barrier to internal progression within the college.

### **Conclusions: duality, seamlessness, and widening participation**

This chapter has looked at practices related to moving between FE and HE in two dual sector institutions in England. Such institutions are seen as offering additional ways of widening participation by providing progression routes for students traditionally under-represented in HE, but who are could be defined as the 'traditional' students of further education (Widdowson, 2005). Their contribution may take a variety of forms, and has involved a range of different initiatives in the English context, which are considered in some detail in chapter 2. One way in which they may contribute to widening participation which is distinct from other HE providers is by offering internal pathways between FE and HE. Proponents of duality go further than this (see Duke, 2005; Garrod and Macfarlane, 2007) and suggest that duality could lead towards a seamless system of lifelong education.

However, the two examples offered in this chapter give rise for caution. Whilst there are increasing numbers of institutions operating in both the FE and HE sectors, their dual sector nature does not mean that they try to align or bring together their work across two sectors. Both spatial and knowledge boundaries, which have been the focus of this chapter, may be as strongly maintained in a dual sector setting as they are in separate institutions. What students' experience at Citygate College also highlights, is that, as Wheelahan (2009, p.36) has suggested,

‘epistemological boundaries must be explicitly navigated rather than ignored, if students are to be supported in crossing them.’

In addition to these concerns, it is important to remember that dual sector institutions form part of a system of higher education which is not just differentiated but stratified (Scott, 1995), and in this system they are positioned lower in the hierarchy of institutional status.

This links to a final important point in relation to duality and widening participation. This chapter has been silent on widening participation to students from under-represented and disadvantaged groups in terms of class, ethnicity, gender, disability or age. Rather, it has focused on widening participation in relation to students who do not have an academic learning background, who have low prior achievements, and who study vocational and applied courses. This forms a major part of the work of FE colleges, new universities and dual sector institutions. By default rather than intention, this includes more disadvantaged students in terms of class, ethnicity and so on. The development of duality and aspirations toward seamlessness need to beware that they do not limit as well as open up the pathways that they make available to such students in the future.

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