

FE and HE or FE versus HE: An analysis of
perspectives from College and University
leaders in England



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A dissertation submitted for the degree of
Master of Science
Trinity 2023

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between Further Education Colleges and Universities as tertiary providers in England, by interviewing participants from the two sectors to understand their thoughts and views. The relationships are discussed in terms of collaboration or competition within the strains of quasi-market logic, student choice, and institutional identity. With students being increasingly viewed as *consumers* and the branding of provision appearing to be just as strategic as the delivery models, there is tension between institutions as they compete for attention. However, this is far from a fair fight. With radically different funding structures, political interest and public knowledge, the Further Education sector is the David to Universities' Goliath; however, where exactly the slingshot is coming from has not yet been decided. With Colleges struggling to curate and maintain their identity, themes of victimhood and the force of marketisation are an ever-present struggle for these institutions, often resulting in scathing reviews from their colleagues. The future of this relationship is presented as a fraught and tense one, with Universities confident in their prestige and Colleges trying to educate *other people's children*. With the hope of collaboration in the future, the issue, for now, remains for Colleges to try to establish their own identity.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	5
1.1 Background to the study.....	5
1.2 Context.....	6
1.3 Landscape Overview.....	6
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	11
2.1 Context and limitation of the literature review.....	11
2.2 A history of alternative provision in England.....	12
2.3 Institutional and organisational identity and definitions.....	15
2.4 The market of FE and HE: funding.....	18
2.5 The market of FE and HE: policy.....	20
2.6 Social Attitudes.....	23
2.7 Crossover of Provision.....	25
2.8 Conclusion.....	26
Chapter 3: Methodology.....	28
3.1 Introduction.....	28
3.1.1 Research Design.....	28
3.1.2 Qualitative Study.....	29
3.1.3 Philosophical Stances.....	29
3.2 Participants.....	30
3.2.1 Research Instrument.....	31
3.2.2 Data Collection.....	32
3.2.3 Data Analysis.....	33
3.3 Rigour.....	33
3.3.1 Researcher’s Positionality.....	34
3.3.2 Ethical Considerations.....	35
3.3 Limitations of this study.....	36
Chapter 4: Analysis and Findings.....	37
4.1 Introduction.....	37
4.2 Competition and Collaboration.....	38
4.2.1 Summary of present relationship, collaboration or competition.....	43
4.3 Choice.....	45
4.3.1 Tertiary and Choice.....	48
4.3.2 Future of choices within tertiary education.....	50
4.4 Identity.....	52
4.4.1 Blurring of boundaries, loss of identity.....	52
4.4.2 What is the meaning of identity?.....	54
4.5 Overview of Findings.....	57

Chapter 5: Contributions of the study to research and practice..60
 5.1 The impact of identity.....60
 5.2 Concluding thoughts.....62
References.....64

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background to the study

Prior to completing my undergraduate degree, I worked for three years in a Further Education (FE) College in South Gloucestershire as a member of the management team for the Academic Faculty. I had responsibility for reviewing policy changes, specifically in Maths and English, and considering how these would impact delivery. I also taught a variety of qualifications. During this time, it was apparent that an increasing emphasis was being placed on higher education qualification development and delivery, this was viewed as both a new source of funding and also had a high demand from students seeking a College setting for their post-secondary school education. With this came the start of an interesting relationship with the local universities, simultaneously directing our students to their provision whilst also lauding the merits of our own. Was this a competition or a collaboration? I could never quite decide.

This relationship has only continued to blur as more Colleges are offering Higher Education (HE) qualifications, such as foundation degrees, HNDs/HNCs, whilst at the same time Universities enthusiastically present their own Level 4 provision to students, through foundation year programmes. For now, there is limited research on the views of these institutions to one another; instead, a considerable amount of research has focussed on the reforms necessary for the FE sector, based upon training, skills and the needs of the economy for skilled workers. This raises the question of what the future of this post-school not-University institution is, will the provision continue to blur with institutions fighting over the same pool of potential students, or is delivery aimed at a distinct cohort, with each sector supporting each other by providing bespoke provision? This research hopes to address these questions.

As such, this research focuses on the relationship in the past, where it is now and where the sectors feel that it will progress, discussing with leaders in both sectors how they view both their own provision and that of their competitors or colleagues within this market system.

1.2 Context

Tertiary education, meaning the third stage of education, is beginning to enter into the mindset of policy initiatives with a focus on framing education and training in more holistic terms with the language of a tertiary sector. Because of this, the division between College and University provision of tertiary education is increasingly becoming a blurred line. With more Universities than ever now offering foundation years and an increasing number of FE Colleges offering HE options, the question is where do these two sectors see their colleagues, as competitors or collaborators?

If we look to policy initiatives, there is clearly a striking divide between the treatment of the two sectors. Further Education has faced decreasing real-term funding and a vast change in delivery aims with the introduction, and apparent slump, of T Levels as well as the policy requirements for vocational qualifications and sector-wide reviews questioning whether the sector is meeting the needs of its learners and the employers involved (Department for Education, 2019). Very recent policy initiatives to reduce *rip-off degrees* and increase degree apprenticeships point to the perceived importance of skills and training (Department for Education 2023a, 2023b). However, these have also led to a very reductive understanding of *vocational vs academic* education and as such, emphasises the market logic and importance of competition within post-secondary education initiatives.

Despite this national quasi-marketised regulatory framework, there are localised examples of where collaborative system approaches are coming

to the fore, with cities and regions embracing collaborations and quasi-market logic is not enacted as the preferred approach. With this rapidly changing and evolving landscape there is a continued need to examine the relationships between these two sectors to understand the present and future of tertiary education in England. It is, therefore, crucial to understand how the relationships are perceived and experienced by the key stakeholders within the sector and understand from them the realities that they are facing.

1.3 Landscape Overview

Through a literature review of the historical and present provision, and interviews with tertiary educators in the South East of England, this paper presents an analysis of the views of those within the sectors about this ill-defined space to consider what the future may be for providers of tertiary education in England.

Further Education Colleges in England provide education for 2.2 million students with around 244 Colleges in the FE sector (this includes both sixth-form and specialist Colleges) of which 168 are General Further Education Colleges (GFE) (Education and Training Foundation, 2020). It is these GFE Colleges which are the focus of this research. These Colleges provide a diverse curriculum offering various academic, vocational and professional courses.

It is the breadth of provision that FE offers which, Stanton et al. (2015) argue, “simplifies the life of school sixth forms and universities by enabling them to keep their more focussed missions” (Stanton et al., 2015, p.69). However, does simplifying imply that there is a clear demarcation of roles between these three bodies, or is there the temptation to climb the fence to the other man’s grass?

In 2021, 1.4 million adults (aged 18+) attend FE Colleges, undertaking the breadth of provision (Association for Colleges, 2021). FE plays a huge and

fundamental role in providing education for a large number of students across a plethora of levels, the Colleges, despite this significance, have often been left with poor funding, a rapid number of policy failings and ultimately the Cinderella caricature, in rags waiting for her prince, with little hope of being offered a fairy godmother to support them (Petrie, 2015, p.2).

Within this research, the *market* will be used in the sense the HE system in England is not a textbook economic model and there is extensive public research funding as well as long-term dominance by some elite institutions that are protected as Marginson (2018) phrases it. However, there are sufficient examples of competition such as “enhanced stratification and less diversity among institutions” (Marginson, 2013, p. 298) to warrant this paper discussing the *market* of FE and HE. Particularly this will consider the private over public good of education and prestige acting as an indirect indicator of institutional quality due to the absence of sufficient data on education achievement and quality (Brown, 2010). Therefore, market and market logic will be a lens used throughout this research to consider the relationship between Colleges and Universities.

The literature discussed in chapter two presents an increasingly marketised and converging provision, but without much consideration of how each views the other. The discussion of qualification provision as, rather reductively, either vocational or academic highlights the separate attitudes these institutions face, but this is not necessarily the personal view of those within the sector. Therefore, it is left to the interview findings to decide where this relationship is presently and where it may lead. Through gathering and analysing this qualitative evidence and drawing findings from the views and opinions of those working in these sectors, this research aims to add to the discussion of tertiary education in England by considering the impact of students as consumers and the significant impact of market economics on our education system, crucially in relation to the identity of Colleges. England has been chosen for this

study due to the ongoing suggestions for reforms to the FE sector and also because of the centralised policy provision.

The blurring of provision between FE and HE is becoming an increasingly important topic in tertiary education. With over 37.9% of 18-year-olds due to begin full-time undergraduate courses (The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), 2021) and the fees and funding for this delivery continuing to re-emerge as a political agenda, the place of FE within this discussion must be brought to the fore.

Following the literature review and interviews conducted, three key themes will guide the analysis:

- 1) Competition and Collaboration
- 2) Choice
- 3) Identity

Competition and Collaboration. What was clear from the interviews conducted is that both sectors present as offering bespoke education that is unique to themselves, whether as a sector or as an individual provider. Therefore, whilst objectively there may be an overlap in courses, the organisations themselves see a unique selling point that they are able to provide to their students, or perhaps more relevantly, customers. This leads to competition being felt from the FE sector; many participants from the Colleges felt that they were undervalued, underfunded and misunderstood, leading to a competition that they could never win against the Universities' offers. In contrast, University participants denied that competition was a factor, instead they viewed their contact with FE Colleges as collaboration and that the two institutions worked well together. Some University participants wanted this relationship to go further and for Universities to *adopt* Colleges into group partnerships. However, this led to great concerns from FE participants over their identity, and the issue of them seeing themselves as the victims of an

economic structure that values the prestige and private good of the Universities over the public good that Colleges could provide.

Choice. The second notable theme was that of choice, that all participants felt that choice for students was important and the more options that are available for students the greater chances of increasing participation and access to HE. However, there was also a consensus that the number of courses on offer and options available for young people meant greater confusion for students, parents, teachers and employers. The vastness of choice meant that employers struggled to understand what was being offered. Thus, the undergraduate degree remains the known qualification, carrying extra but perhaps unjustified prestige and value in the workplace. This produced tension between Universities wanting to ensure student access but not wanting to increase the number of qualifications they offer in case this could dilute their reputation. Many Colleges felt that not only did employers not understand the courses being offered but neither did the Government, leading to greater obscurity regarding what the sector provides and ultimately leading to Colleges feeling that they were fundamentally misunderstood as a sector with little power to form an identity.

Identity. The most dominant theme that was present in this research was the notion of identity. How Colleges and Universities defined themselves, their colleagues and what this meant for their position within the market. This lent itself to a discussion of how definitions are formed, meanings created and the meta-societal structures at play, here marketisation and the impact of market logic on the education sector. This theme is perhaps the most useful for understanding the relationships between FE Colleges and Universities.

As we can see, there is much complexity in the relationship between these two providers, and the significant impact that competition can have on education should not be underestimated. With this rapidly changing

landscape and the possible misunderstandings of those creating the policy initiatives that will impact the sectors, it is vitally important to understand from those in these relationships what they feel are the key areas of collaboration and tension. This research will not simply present the thoughts of those within the sectors as to where they see the present relationships they have, but also give an insight into the actuality of tertiary education in England; through the lens of considering the impact of market-based funding and policy initiatives within which these institutions have to work. The analysis of these views will hopefully help map out the significance of the theoretical approach of market economics within these relationships and what that points towards for the future of tertiary education in England.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter will consider relevant literature relating to the relationship between FE Colleges and Universities by looking at the history of FE; the relevance of definition and institutional and organisational identity; the market versus systems debate within FE and HE; student as consumer, and finally the crossover of provision within these sectors. This literature review aims not to list every area of competition or collaboration but to look at significant research conducted and consider how these issues may influence the relationship between these two sectors.

2.1 Context and limitation of the literature review

Conducting this literature review highlighted the limited work that has so far been completed on the relationships within tertiary education in England by those within the system. Less is written about FE in England than there is about Primary, Secondary and HE, in part possibly due to the fact that it is less prevalent and thus opaquer (Bailey and Unwin, 2014). However, this meant that the available work that did make comparisons often overlapped or relied on each other. Similarly, foundation courses and FE's delivery of HE provision is relatively new and has not received as much attention as it may in the future. Also, when reviewing policy and Government comments on FE, again, there is less substantial engagement with the sector than with the education that takes place on either side. Nonetheless, this is a growing area of academic concern. As such, a good amount of interest in this topic makes this a rich, vibrant and relevant area of discussion. The issue of the market structure, particularly of FE and HE, is an area worthy of development, and this chapter highlights the historical, social, political and financial literature within this debate to set the scene for the interview findings.

This literature review has been structured to begin with an outline of alternative provision in England and how this transitioned over many

years to what we now describe as the FE sector. From here, the review will then look at the historical relationship between FE and HE, followed by market and system approaches to FE and HE. Themes of social importance, financial status, political landscape and marketisation ideologies at play will be considered through the lens of neo-institutional theory and market logic to understand what impact competition may have had on attitudes and relationships between institutions and wider policy and societal ideas. Finally, this chapter will present an overview of the provision in both sectors and how these fit into the social, political and historical discussions we have already considered.

2.2 A history of alternative provision in England

In 1997 Ainley and Bailey warned that the “history of further and technical education in Britain is still to be written” (Ainley and Bailey, 1997, p.125). This statement came from their reflection on the growing historical and pedagogical study of schools and Universities in England that had emerged after the Second World War, but also the distinct lack of interest in the sector that took up the middle ground.

Despite the term being enshrined in legislation from 1907 (Bailey, 2002) there was a 50-year gap before it was widely adopted, and not until after the Second World War was technical education or teachers to teach their vocation of interest for the education sphere (Venables, 1967). Thus, it was necessary that technical education was placed on the radar of the Ministry of Education (Bristow, 1976). This initial branding as *technical* has perhaps stuck the most for Colleges as we shall see during the rest of this research.

With this technical education, County Colleges grew to provide 15–18-year-olds, who were not in full-time education, with education during their day release from their employment. The 1944 Education Act mandated that Local Education Authorities (LEAs) planned the development of the

County Colleges alongside the wider post-war planning and housing projects (Griggs & Lowe, 1989).

During the 1950s and 1960s, FE experienced an exponential increase of over 1200%, twice that of secondary education (Griggs & Lowe, 1989, p. 97). Whilst some of this number can be allocated to specialist Colleges, the vast majority was for General FE through local authority-maintained institutions for the purpose of rebuilding society after the war. From here, the Colleges continued to grow, offering various technical, vocational and academic courses, often in the evenings.

Between 1956 and 1969 a hierarchy of College types emerged: Advanced, Regional, Area and Local. Thus, a centralised approach could be implemented from the Advanced Colleges towards the Local ones accumulating in the change in 1966/1967 to Colleges of Advanced Technology (8 polytechnics), the first to become direct-grant institutions not reliant on LEA and then in 1966/67 becoming the new Universities. With the higher tiers of these Colleges merging into HE institutions, what was left for Area and Local FE Colleges was less certain, their purpose less defined and their provision ever growing with loose definitions of level or mode of studying, leaving murky waters to navigate. (Richardson, 2007, p. 388).

The largest of these remaining FE institutions were the local Colleges and what we can most closely link to the provision we have now. The Ministry for Education designed them to provide more on the vocational side, for mainly part-time courses (Bristow, 1976). The Crowther Committee (1959) was established to review provision for 15-18-year-olds and concluded that Further Education was a *term of art*. Such was the extent of this confusing wedge of education, with LEAs free to curate provision that they saw fit for their local communities, including the titles of the institutions themselves, causing yet more opaqueness to the provision. This was reflected in both the Crowther Report (1959) and the Robbins Report

(1961-1963) being unable to establish, with certainty, the number of institutions and institution types. We can note that the individualistic intricacy of the FE system, despite its prevalence, leads to a complex and historically hard-to-define area of education.

Moving on to the 1980s and 1990s, the introduction of the private sector into FE allowed for more established branding of General Colleges of Further Education and with the trend of the early 1990s for school leavers to continue their education post-16 meant that FE Colleges were becoming more definable if not entirely demarcated.

One of the most significant policy shifts for FE was the White Paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century* (1991) which removed the burden of FE provision from LEAs; on “the last day of their control—31 March 1993—the English LEAs presided over 464 Colleges that were about to comprise the independent sector of FE” (Richardson, 2007, p.391). From this point, we have seen a steady increase in a focus on skills and training continuing into recent years. In 2001 foundation degrees were formally launched, in 2005 the Foster Report (*Realising the Potential: the future role of FE colleges*, 2005) developed “financial incentives to steer students onto courses valuable to the economy” (Keep et al., 2023, p.20). A year later in 2006 The Department for Education and Skills White Paper *Further education: Raising skills, improving life chances* (2006), continued to strengthen the FE Colleges' role in providing HE. Then in 2007 the Further Education and Training Act (2007) allowed Colleges to apply to award their foundation degrees independent of Universities.

On a social level, the 2011 Education Act removed the requirement for Colleges to promote an area's economic and social well-being and may have led to Colleges being less aware of their local needs, thus further promoting the business model of their provision. This market idea can further be seen in the 2013 Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning dubbed *It's all about work* suggesting that all vocational curricula

should be focused on collaboration between Colleges, training providers and employers with a focus on the goal of work. In 2019 Dr Philip Augar chaired the independent panel report to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding, offering detailed recommendations for the overhaul of the structure and funding systems for FE and HE in England. Finally, and most recently, the House of Commons Education Committee report: *Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance* (2023) emphasised the necessity for more guidance to be offered to students, parents and employers around the options available for education in England in schools, FE and HE.

Keep (2018) in their analysis of the FE sector summarises its future in this way:

“[The] future shape of the college sector is unclear, as is the relative priority that needs to be afforded between FE’s multiple roles as a provider of 16-19 and adult education; as a provider of vocational skills (including higher-level skills); and also as a second-chance route for both young people and adults.” (Keep, 2018, p.18)

This is a good summary to finish this section by appreciating the complexity of the sector and the various directions it is pulled in. We will now go on to discuss how this impacts the identity and definition of this complex sector of education.

2.3 Institutional and organisational identity and definitions

The historical makeup of FE lends itself to a system that dutifully tries to support its local community whilst adapting to changing policies and trying to secure its funding, issues which shall be further considered later in this review. What is important to note from the attempt to outline the FE sector is that there is plenty of grey area about what the sector is, not what it does, but what it is: its definition and identity. This is a crucial

difference for our discussion within this research, Universities can offer many definitions. What a University is has millennia of history to build upon and its definitions rely less on what it provides, that is to say the qualifications, and more on what it is at its core. Perkin (2007) offers this definition of a European University:

“[an] institution recognizable as a University arise: a school of higher learning combining teaching and scholarship and characterized by its corporate autonomy and academic freedom.” (Perkin, 2007, p.159)

What is different, it seems from the discussion of how to define FE, is that there is no focus on qualifications offered or the students attending but on what the University is as a place of ‘higher learning’.

The Department for Education (2012) outlines Further Education in the following way:

“Further education (FE) includes any study after secondary education that’s not part of higher education (that is, not taken as part of an undergraduate or graduate degree). Courses range from basic English and maths to Higher National Diplomas (HNDs).” (Department for Education, 2012)

From this alone, we can see that FE is defined in the negative by what it is not, it is not secondary education, and it is not higher education, followed swiftly by examples of FE's courses. To define FE, it seems necessary to state what it does and does not do, not what it is. Thus, the sector as a whole is presented as a middle ground, neither school nor University, with little more identity than the courses it offers.

How definitions link to identity is important for understanding the relationship between Colleges and Universities. Identity refers to sameness, it is the ability to group based upon similarities, whether something is alike (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005). However, this can be hard for outsiders to determine; this is often seen in linguistics when

determining the similarities and differences of language use and whether to identify by grouping certain types of language use. For attempting a definition of FE we can see a similar issue. As an outsider, it could be hard to determine what exactly makes the institutions similar and how they should be grouped. If the identity is uncertain, a definition is hard to attribute, then understanding the group, in this case, Colleges, also becomes harder to establish. It is therefore necessary to look to other methods to attribute identity, one of which is to “attend closely to speakers’ own understandings of their identities” (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005, pp371), which this research will seek to do through interviews.

One of the most notable market-style attributes of the HE sector in England is the competition that Brown (2010) argues is at play at the top and bottom of the hierarchy. At the top the elite institutions compete for prestige against each other and in an international market. At the bottom, institutions compete for student numbers. Locke (2009) comments that:

“Reputation has not come into play due to the absence of information about quality—to fill an information void—but because it is regarded (by universities, employers, government and some students) as ultimately more important than quality” (Locke, 2009 ,p. 80).

It is the competition for numbers that is most useful for this research, However, prestige as a University instead of a College is also a helpful lens for our consideration of the relationship between the institutions as the Universities within this research see themselves on a hierarchy different to the Colleges.

Thus, with these ideas in mind, we can look to neo-institutional theory as a useful lens to consider the issues of what shapes organisational and institutional identity, particularly relevant to the regulation of FE and HE through market forces (Ingleby, 2015). The neo-institutional theory is the perspective we can use to understand how societal institutions influence and conform to certain established norms, values and practices. It

explores the processes of institutionalisation, isomorphism, and legitimacy, which shape the behaviour of organisations (Robson et al., 2021).

In the context of FE, neo-institutional theory offers a reason why many Colleges feel the need to adapt and conform to certain patterns, structures, and practices that are considered legitimate and expected within the education sector because Universities conform to them. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argue that institutions that are facing uncertainty look to change their strategies, they look to other institutions to mirror via mimetic isomorphism. Colleges are imitating the successful and prestigious University model of delivering HE courses through adopting both the provision and strategies that have been successful for Universities (Robson et al., 2021). Again, this leaves the identity of FE in the shadows of Universities as Colleges seek to mirror their University colleagues. In many ways, this need to conform to the standards of the Universities may reflect a symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) against the FE sector as its identity is eroded, which we shall see further with the skills rhetoric from policy initiatives (Duckworth and Smith, 2017). This violence could be attributed to the lack of identity that Colleges feel they have, and as such, perhaps they do not have their own identity or voice, meaning that the views and values of others, particularly Universities, are free to force their own definitions onto the Colleges and in turn, students.

The theory of victimhood (Jacoby, 2014) in relation to the blurring of boundaries between the two sectors, provides an insightful correlation between identity and boundaries. Grievance-based identity is constructed on blurring “ongoing cycles of belligerence and retribution” (Jacoby, 2014, p.511). Jacoby presents the argument that politics and conflict play a large role in the construction of victim-based identity that supports many of the themes noted within this research, with a distinction between victimisation as the “act of harm perpetrated against a person or group,

and victimhood as a form of collective identity based on that harm” (Jacoby, 2014, p.511). This latter concept can be seen within the attitudes of FE participants as they struggle for recognition. Thus, a collective identity is constructed through this sense of victimhood that those within the FE sector may present as having due to their perceived relationships with Universities. Victimhood further ties in with power and subordination themes that we can note within the inequalities in policy and funding and the reductive definitions and analysis of the sector. Going even further into the issues of boundaries, if Colleges are seen as holding victim-style identities, then the boundaries or feeling of self-preservation through strict boundaries are further linked to ideas of victimhood and the “influence of boundaries as the very essence of the group” (Jacoby, 2014, p.516). Without a boundary between FE and HE it could be seen as an eroding of victim identity, making Colleges even more cautious of collaborating with Universities

Therefore, there appears to be a requirement to learn from those within the FE sector as to what the sector actually is, for them to provide the definition for study as for the outsider to focus on the meaning created by the participants rather than forcing upon them a definition which they do not feel is appropriate. Perhaps, in itself, this need to seek the definitions from the participants points to larger differences and inequalities between the sectors that we can begin to understand by looking at funding and policy initiatives,

2.4 The market of FE and HE: funding

Having considered the historical setting of this research and the suggestion that the organisational and institutional identity may be linked to trying to replicate successful competitors, we now need to consider the market aspect of these relationships and how this may link to our debate of collaboration or competition. Marginson (2018) notes that the economy leads governments, we can consider the issue of a market economy in

education by looking first at the contrasting funding systems used by Colleges and Universities and then reflecting upon how these link to the notions of the student as consumer, market principles of competition and choice and finally, where this leaves access to the market for students.

HE funding in England has endured much turbulence in the latter quarter of the 20th century. In 1976 tuition fees were abolished for University education before being brought back at £1,000 per year by Tony Blair's Government in 1998. The Dearing Inquiry on tuition fees concluded that students contributing to the cost of their education would be necessary but not necessarily understood by everyone, commenting that "arguments in favour of a contribution to tuition costs from graduates in work are strong, if not widely appreciated" (Dearing Inquiry, 20:40, 1997). Fees then continued to rise with additional increases in 2006/7, 2012/13 and remaining at £9250 since 2017 (Bolton, 2018). In addition to these sticker price increases, of particular significance has been the shift away from largely non-repayable maintenance bursaries to maintenance loans of up to £12,667 (Department for Education, 2012).

With this shift in HE funding, the question is raised as to whether HE is a public or private good. For the present system, with students paying 100% of the fees, even though loans may be taken out, the burden rests with the student. There seems to be an implication that HE is a solely private benefit, the student becomes the consumer and the product provided by the institution (Barr, 2009). Thus, students are persuaded by these mechanisms to treat HE as a good to be shopped for in the market, seeking the best value and being drawn to the most attractive offer. The Teaching Excellence Framework, one of the methods of awarding status to HE providers, looks to students' satisfaction and employability as part of its ranking, thus, consumer satisfaction leads to a higher ranking within this market-based system (Ashwin, 2017).

Given the richness of HE funding it is understandable why Colleges have sought to secure this funding system for themselves, particularly when we look at their alternative. FE funding sits in a very different arena to HE; FE can deliver courses from 16 (or 14 in some cases) up to part-time professional qualifications, which means a highly complex funding model plagues most Colleges (Perry and Davies, 2015).

A review of FE and HE funding commented on FE in these terms:

“Overall, the picture is one of a sector which, after some real growth in the early 2000s, now sees total funding declining in real terms. It is a sector funded less generously than school provision and much less generously than universities. Moreover, its shrinking share of total education funding indicates that it is not, in practice, a top priority for governments.” (Wolf, 2015, p.15)

With this shortfall, Colleges are left to the whim of Government initiatives grasping at whatever funding streams are passed in their direction. With the increasing dominance of employer-FE relationships, funding opportunities have arisen through partnerships. This employer-responsive provision, often in the form of 19+ apprenticeships, has seen a steady rise in funding in the FE sector since 2010, providing almost half of the funding that FE Colleges receive (Foster, 2019). In comparison, loans through Advanced Learner Loans only account for around a third of the apprenticeship funding, highlighting the financial reliance of many Colleges on the more traditional vocational pathways (Foster, 2019).

The Government’s funding of the FE sector in England is unique in its healthy enthusiasm for funding price-trading organisations and channels a considerable amount of budget towards organisations that are often small, Wolf notes there is very little information as to what these providers are offering and whether they are good value for money (Wolf, 2015, p.29). Considering the trend for work-based learning (normally apprenticeships) is increasing, where exactly this money is going is becoming even harder to track (Wolf, 2015). This notion of value has very

recently been seen with the announcement of a review and defunding of *rip-off degrees*. How it will be decided which degrees are *rip-off* has yet to be clarified (Department for Education, 2023b). This, yet again, shows the economic considerations at play in relation to HE in England. From initial media coverage, it is suggested that *rip-off* degrees are those that do not lead to high employment rates or high wages. Still, there is little evidence of consideration of anything other than private and economic good, the public good and the joys of learning are lost against the tide of economic benefits.

With students studying HE in both Colleges and Universities having to 100% fund their studies, HE is positioned as an entirely private good with a marketplace principle leading to any public good within HE being unfunded (Marginson, 2018). Thus, it is clear that HE has become an economic commodity, where those who can, or are willing to, pay will do so for their own benefit. Cementing the notion of the students being the consumer and alluding to a stakeholder theory, whereby the students will guide the provision as we shall see in discussions around foundation years from the interviews (Langrafe et al., 2020).

2.5 The market of FE and HE: policy

Robson et al. (2021) argue that:

“Following the Education Reform Act of 1988, which introduced the principles of parental choice, funding following the learner and diversity of provision...the educational policy of successive governments has largely been rooted in neoliberal assumptions, with the education system structured in what is often described as a quasi-market....” (Robson et al., 2021).

If this is the case, then to look at the impact of the market on the relationship between Colleges and Universities, we need to consider the meta-structures at play from a policy perspective carefully and how the

quasi-market ideology has influenced attitudes within the education sector, perhaps rooted in neoliberal assumptions of the benefits of competition. However, before looking at these neo-liberal attitudes, it is first necessary to consider assumptions from those making the policies.

The political attitudes to the FE sector remain closely linked to those of social class (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Thompson, 2009). Summed up by Richardson in 2007:

“So far as those in Whitehall and the media are concerned, the fundamental but unspoken point about Colleges of general FE in class-conscious England remains that they are boring, hard to understand and something best suited to ‘other people’s children’.” Richardson (2007, p.411).

How, then, does this portion of tertiary education still fight to be the Cinderella of education with the potential to create the future of employment by producing future-skilled students ready for the ever-changing needs of the knowledge based-economy? There seems to be a political gap between FE's aims and perceived usefulness and the willingness to invest in the sector. Keep (2018) argues that:

“Marketisation and competitive pressures are increasing, while colleges are simultaneously being told to cooperate with other providers in their area - for example, around social mobility.” (Keep, 2018).

This points to the issues that many have questioned whether the political rhetoric of social inclusion and global competitiveness that FE can be a bastion of is really supported by policy agendas, a policy vacuum still exists around this topic (Avis, 2006; Keep 2018; Wolf, 2002,). However, with FE being firmly secured within the lifelong learning agenda (Department for Education, 2019) there is a common feature of FE being the second-class player compared to Universities and sixth-form Colleges.

The policy initiatives surrounding FE have often led to the Colleges scrambling after new funding streams and attempting to plug gaps in delivery created by new education reforms, Colleges have to follow the money (Perry and Davies, 2015). The 2015 introduction of compulsory education until 18 meant that Colleges received more students than ever but with little additional capital to support this growth. Therefore, the policy had an impact on the sector being left to tidy up insufficient education (Norris, 2022). This is further compounded by a lack of understanding “some aspects of FE are by no means easy to predict by those outside the ‘sealed unit’ that is central government’s policymaking system and process” (Keep 2018). Thus, the political rhetoric of FE being at the foreground of progress does not seem to fit with the lived experiences of what is required on the ground. However, it is necessary to hear this from those within the institutions.

The 2021 White Paper *Skills for Jobs* seems to present the FE sector as the Edenic epicentre for training workers for jobs. However, what this also highlights, as discussed above with the marketisation of funding, is that the focus is on the economic benefits to society of the FE sector, the skills that can be fostered, rather than the wider social function and benefits of Colleges. This only further points to the political value of FE being viewed as a tool to create workers. Bowles and Gintis (1976) reflect on this idea by commenting on the education system:

“[It] not only insures the student to the discipline of the workplace, but develops the types of personal demeanour, modes of self-presentation, self-image, and social class identifications which are the crucial ingredients of job adequacy” (Bowles and Gintis, 1976, p.131).

We can attribute this stratification to how FE is presented as the skills and training sector. The 2022, *Skills and Post-16 Education Act* further cemented into law the views and opinions that post-16 education should be for working to gain employment. The Minister for Skills Alex Burghart commented:

“The Skills and Post-16 Education Act will transform the skills, training and post-16 education landscape and level up opportunities across the country. This legislation will make sure everyone can gain the skills they need to progress into a rewarding job, and businesses have access to a pipeline of talented, qualified employees for their workforces – boosting productivity.” (Department for Education, 2022).

This highlights the triple-layered way that “individuals are stratified and existing inequalities perpetuated” (Duckworth and Smith, 2017, p.29). Duckworth and Smith (2017), argue that this stratification begins with the Government presenting a reductive and “dehumanising ‘skills’ discourse” (p.30), which is focussed on economic needs. This is followed by the second layer that creates a binary through a qualification framework of *vocational or academic* and places FE as exclusively vocational “with all the negative baggage” (p.30) that comes with this division. Finally, the FE sector casts students as consumers due to the “competitive marketization” (p.30) that has emerged. All of this points to the FE sector being stuck in a market where the customer has replaced the student and the economic success has written off the social good as the goal for education.

If we place this in terms of the market, we can see how important the human capital of students for employers is for a successful society (Becker, 1993), particularly according to the policy being created recently. The economic successes through trained and skilled workers appear to be the overriding aim of policy relating to FE, thus highlighting that the market is the driving force of the initiatives, with human capital rather than the social good being the purpose in the market space of education.

2.6 Social Attitudes

Much as research on FE is less frequent than that of secondary and Universities, despite schooling half of all school leavers and the

significance of the sector for skills that we have discussed above, even less work has been conducted on the significance of social class and social attitudes to the sector.

Participation in FE has historically been related to social class through its origins as a tool of social mobility and for the working population as well as non-traditional students (Avis & Orr, 2016; Goldstone, 2022; Orr, 2020). Whilst FE Colleges are heralded as the potential Cinderellas of the education system, ready to enact social change, lead the way in social mobility and train, educate and re-educate, they also retain a student demographic which is largely absent of high-achieving students (Thompson, 2009; Wolf, 2015). However, this is still a problematic distinction to make as achievement is most often measured in terms of HE qualifications achieved not job security or career success, again an example of the prestige of HE over FE.

Avis and Orr's (2016) study of *less prestigious* HE provision delivered through Colleges found that there was disproportionate participation from working-class students. The make-up of FE Colleges remains closely related to previous education performance and, according to evidence from Thompson's (2009) review of the Youth Cohort Study of England and Wales, this provided a stronger correlation:

"the increasing likelihood of attending such institutions with descending class position; and an increasing participation rate in post-compulsory education with ascending class position." (Thompson, 2009, p.41).

Thus, we can note that there is a stronger likelihood of lower achieving students attending a FE College than simply the social class attributes. A high-achieving working-class student is less likely to attend a FE College than others within their class position and those of a middle-class position are more likely to attend a FE College if they, at the point of choice, have achieved poorly. Nonetheless, there is still a disproportionate number of working-class students, who may achieve well, still attending FE than the

similarly achieving middle-class counterparts. However, middle-class self-exclusion is not to be underestimated. Unless through self-inflicted poor performance, middle-class families will still avoid the FE sector, thus leaving a chasm of social and cultural capital missing from FE classrooms (Abrahams et al., 2018; Thompson, 2009).

Where does this distaste of FE from the middle classes stem from? Colley et al. (2003) argue a self-fulfilling prophecy of low-status vocational courses such as childcare and plumbing being largely populated by those from a working-class background, thus reproducing social inequalities. Bathmaker (2005, 2016) argues that to enrol on a FE course is an acknowledgement of a student's lower status as students and others go as far as to say that this is an acceptance that some opportunities are closed to them.

“They [the students] follow a particular route, not so much because they know what they want to do, but because they know what they cannot do” (Bathmaker 2005, p.86).

The quality of the education received at FE Colleges also appears to play a role. Reay (2017) explains, “if you are poor, you are likely to have less-experienced and less-qualified teachers than more privileged students have, as well as poorer educational facilities” (Reay, 2017, p.74). This theme of the quality of FE education was reflected in many similar reviews (Burkill et al., 2008; Feather, 2010, 2012; Wilson & Wilson, 2011, Wright et al., 2022). As well as teaching, access to opportunities also appears limited for those attending FE (Abrahams, 2018; Atkinson, 2011; Burke, 2015). However, it is worth noting that this research still focuses on the social class of students that happen to be in FE, rather than FE itself, leaving a significant gap in the literature to understand the views of those within the sector.

An analysis of this nature would be inadequate without a comment from Bourdieu. In his terms, we can see the “unequal selectiveness” (Bourdieu

and Passeron 1977, p.72) that is operating where middle-class students are only sparsely selected for FE. Thus, other than working-class students, it is only the failing middle-class students seeking a second chance that FE is providing for, not those who have actively chosen FE as their first choice.

2.7 Crossover of Provision

Since 2007, some FE Colleges have been granted degree-awarding powers (Further Education and Training Act, 2007). This changed the landscape for tertiary education providers as Colleges were given equal footing as Universities to deliver HE. However, this is not the only method for Colleges to provide HE, in 2021 the Centre for Global and Higher Education conducted research into these relationships and found that 89% of Colleges surveyed (130 Colleges in the UK) “indicated that they had joint arrangements or direct partnerships with at least one University” (Shattock and Hunt, 2021, p.12). In 2012 82% of English Colleges reported indirect funding relationships with HE institutions (Parry et al., 2012). As such, it is clear that FE Colleges' choice to deliver HE in one way or another is prevalent across the country, showing enthusiasm to break down the boundaries between these providers.

However, it is worth noting that the vast majority of Universities linked in some way to FE Colleges are skewed towards Post-1992 Universities with this group making up 49% of the relationships (Shattock and Hunt, 2021). Therefore, although the picture clearly shows considerable engagement, it is not an equal spread of engagement across all providers, with Russell Group Universities only making up 5% of the participants (Shattock and Hunt, 2021).

The key crossover of provision is when Colleges and Universities are providing the same courses. For example, a College providing a foundation degree, accredited by University A, may be offering the same

degree as University B is offering. With a large proportion of FE Colleges offering HE courses, the potential for duplicated offers within a local area is highly likely. However, whether these institutions feel they are competing or collaborating will be discussed in Chapter Four.

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter reviewed the existing literature relating to the relationship between FE and HE, in relation to historical, funding, political and social topics. What has been shown is the absence of literature specifically looking at the relationship between the sectors from the perspective of those within the institutions. Of particular significance is the impact of the market on the relationships and how this impacts the identity of Colleges. Therefore, what was also revealed from this literature review is the necessity to seek the views and opinions of those within the sectors themselves to understand this relationship's present and future position. The voice of the stakeholders involved in this relationship will help to bypass some of the gaps in the literature by hopefully filling these areas with the lived experiences, understanding and values of those on the frontline.

From this literature review, three key research questions have been specifically highlighted as significant areas of interest:

- 1) What is the present relationship between FE and HE, as viewed by those within the sector?
- 2) How might market logic impact the relationship between these two sectors?
- 3) What is the future of tertiary education in the FE sector?

These three questions have been chosen as they seek to add to the literature on the relationship between FE and HE by garnering the opinions of those within the sector and seeking to understand how the market has been influential upon this relationship. By discussing these topics with stakeholders from both sectors, hopefully, this research can

add to the discussion by deeply understanding what the lived experiences are of those dealing with the policy and funding strategies highlighted in the literature, as well as their views and opinions on social and economic issues within tertiary education in England.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the methodology of the research conducted for this dissertation. As well as the research design, this chapter will specifically consider the recruitment of participants, strategies and decisions within the data collection and the data analysis process. The researcher's philosophical stances, research rigour and researcher's role in the research and study will be discussed, as well as ethical issues.

3.1.1 Research Design

The research design is based on exploratory inductive and deductive research to provide an understanding through direct and indirect inference from participants, considering the institution they are coming from and their positionality. This research was designed with an exploration of themes and ideas as a central aim. As explained by Swedberg (2020) exploratory study looks to explore a topic based on the reading conducted without a clear idea of what will be found. This was deemed an appropriate method to understand individuals' perspectives for this research given the gaps identified within the literature review.

As this research conducted semi-structured interviews with a qualitative focus, it was important to maintain a reflexive approach to the interviews and research questions (Ruslin et al., 2022,). Hammersley and Atkinson's (1995) summary of this research design is that it is a "reflexive process operating through every stage of a project" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p. 24). This design allowed for the freedom to change the course of the interviews or engage with ideas the participant discussed, thus allowing for the perspectives of those involved to be clearly highlighted.

Three research questions were implemented to guide this study:

- 1) What is the present relationship between FE and HE, as viewed by those within the sector?
- 2) How might market logic impact the relationship between these two sectors?
- 3) What is the future of tertiary education in the FE sector?

3.1.2 Qualitative Study

With the focus of this research being the relationship between the FE and HE sectors and the views and opinions of those working within the sectors, it was most appropriate for this research to take the form of a qualitative semi-structured interview-based study of professionals within both sectors. In order for the research to fit the scale of this MSc, it was decided that a study of the South East of England, excluding London, would provide the breadth and depth appropriate for the size of this paper.

3.1.3 Philosophical Stances

In terms of the philosophical stance and position of the researcher, this study was undertaken with constructivist assumptions. That is to say that it was the interpretation and understanding of the meaning of lived experiences, knowledge construction and perceived reality of the individuals being interviewed that was of interest (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Lincoln et al., 2011). Therefore, to understand whether educators in the FE and HE sectors saw themselves as competing against or complimenting each other and how they viewed the blurring of the boundaries between the two sectors, warranted the use of semi-structured interviews with leaders from both sectors. Based on their views and opinions about this relationship, findings about the boundaries, competition, or collaboration were researched through a thematic analysis of the data collected. From this thematic analysis, three key themes

emerged that guided the research's findings and discussion: 1) Competition and Collaboration, 2) Choice, 3) Identity.

The philosophy of language is particularly important as participants try to create meaning within their interviews. Therefore, the best approaches are the constructivism and interpretivism approaches to understanding the complex worldview that the participants hold towards their own identity and the identity of those within their field from their point of view. As such, *Verstehen*, in the Weberian sense, is a useful guiding principle to ensure that the participants' values, views and opinions are presented empathetically as far as possible (Tucker, 1965). Thus, this research will focus on understanding thought processes, meanings and how these lead to opinions. Therefore, because of this and the gaps noted within the literature review, the view of stakeholders was decided to be the most important feature of this research to address the question.

In the main part, this research will reject positivist notions of objective reality and focus on the self-interpretation of lived experiences. This research analyses the participants' epistemological and ontological values (Becker et al., 2012). The epistemological by considering some of the ideas, or knowledge, held by the participants, and the ontological by considering how the participants viewed the nature of both their sector and the sector they are competing or collaborating with, thus forming the main ontological question: what is the reality for the participants: competition or collaboration?

3.2 Participants

This research recruited 15 participants from six FE Colleges and seven Universities across the South East of England, excluding London. It was decided to exclude London as the city has its own ecosystem of post-18 provision, which is dissimilar from the vast majority of the rest of the country. South-East England was chosen as this provided both a richness

of potential interviewees but manageable enough for the size of this research.

The main recruitment strategy for this study was emailing the participant directly or communicating initially with assistants to those to be interviewed. The selection criteria was for those working in Colleges or Universities. Participants were chosen based upon their advertised role within the institution, particularly those responsible for HE provision, curriculum strategy, increasing access to education and overall education provision responsibility. The interviewees' positions ranged from Vice-Chancellors in Universities to CEOs of College Groups and Department Leaders.

After the initial email contact, I then provided information about the interview and research further by sending the participant the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form which outlined the research questions and asked for consent to be given to record the interview and use anonymised quotes.

Number	Anonymised ID	Institution	Role
1	HE 1	University	HE Leader
2	HE 2	University	HE Leader
3	HE 3	University	HE Leader
4	HE 4	University	HE Leader
5	HE 5	University	HE Leader
6	HE 6	University	HE Leader
7	HE 7	University	HE Leader
8	HE 8	University	HE Leader

9	FE 1	Further College	Education	FE Head
10	FE 2	Further College	Education	FE Leader
11	FE 3	Further College	Education	FE Leader
12	FE 4	Further College	Education	FE Head
13	FE 5	Further College	Education	FE Leader
14	FE 6	Further College	Education	FE Leader
15	FE 7	Further College	Education	FE Leader

N.B. HE Leader = Vice-Chancellor or Head of Foundation provision, FE Leader = Principal/CEO, FE Head = Head of Department, Head of HE provision

3.2.1 Research Instrument

An interview protocol was designed and approved via the Central University Research Ethics Committee (Oxford) before the interviews were carried out; this was based on research questions, prior reading, my own understanding and experience of the FE and HE sectors and the aims of this research. The interview protocol was used during the interviews as a basis for questions.

The interview protocol was tested in a pilot interview with a personal contact with experience in the FE sector but was not a participant in the research. As a FE Leader with 15 years of experience in the sector, they were able to offer feedback and provide suggestions for the questions and

structure of the interview. Based on the feedback received, some of the phrasing and the order of the questions were altered.

Having identified the target group for the research it was decided that semi-structured interviews would provide the most appropriate data collection method. Whilst more structured methods of interviews or data collection through surveys and questionnaires may have offered a more focussed and systematic provision of data, it was felt that this would not address the aim of the research to consider the personal views of the interviewees of their relationships. In line with Adam's (2015) research that suggested semi-structured interviews are the most appropriate when those being interviewed are interested in the outcome, it was decided to conduct the research this way.

3.2.2 Data Collection

The data collection process was done through one-to-one, online, semi-structured interviews. All interviewees were offered the option of in-person interviews, but all chose for them to be conducted online, 13 via Microsoft Teams, one via phone call and one via Zoom in June and July 2023. All interviews lasted between 47 minutes and 1hr 11 minutes and were conducted in English.

The interview began with a brief introduction to engage and build up rapport. I thanked them for their engagement and confirmed I had received their signed consent form and what they had agreed. I then offered to introduce myself and my research, which all interviewees accepted.

The interview protocol and question lists were used as a guide for the interviews, with the sequencing adjusted as appropriate during the interview. Questions were tailored depending on the institution or topics that had already been discussed during the interview. I researched based

on public information about both the interviewee and the institution before the interview.

3.2.3 Data Analysis

Once the interviews had been conducted, I used the transcription service available in Microsoft Teams as a verbatim transcript of the interviews for analysis. I re-listened to the interviews and corrected any errors in the transcript to ensure accuracy.

The analysis for this research was the personal views and opinions of the individuals interviewed, this was stressed during the interviews with the participants. Thematic analysis was chosen as the analytical method for this research as this was the most appropriate fit for understanding the individuals' opinions. Because of this, the analysis followed the six-phase thematic analysis process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This process was not always linear; however, where possible, I was guided by the following order:

- 1) I ensured I was familiar with my data by re-listening to the recording and reading the interview transcript whilst taking initial notes of my ideas.
- 2) With reference to my literature review, I considered potential themes and recognised new themes from the data.
- 3) I then created simple codes to connect data across data sets, allowing me to note themes.
- 4) I reviewed these themes by conducting cross-examination on two levels, the first through the coded extracts and the second through looking at the whole data set.
- 5) After this, I aligned themes with my three research questions and grouped them accordingly.
- 6) I then presented the findings with supporting quotes from the interviews.

3.3 Rigour

The rigour of my research was vital to ensure the trustworthiness of this project. I took up Guba's (1981) constructionist paradigm with four stages

to guide my research and ensure that it was satisfactory and rigorous: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

For credibility, I checked and rechecked the accuracy of the quotes I was using from participants by re-reading the transcriptions and listening to recordings. I ensured the quotes were contextualised where appropriate and within the limitations of confidentiality (Sweetman et al., 2010).

Transferability was important to me and refers to the ability of the research findings to be transferred to another context. This formed part of my reasoning not to include London in my research, as I felt this lacked as much transferability. Whilst generalisability was not sought from this research as it focussed on the depth of understanding of the experiences of stakeholders, I was able to make some suggestions about how the context of the discussions within the interviews could be applied when considering the nation-wide relationships between Colleges and Universities.

Dependability requires considering the “explainable changes” in the constructivist paradigm (Guba, 1981, p.81). I tried to ensure the trackable nature of the dependability by undertaking an interview protocol and considered methodology within this research, including setting out the initial questions I would ask before the interviews.

Confirmability revolves around the insurance of minimal bias within the research. However, considering the constructivist perspective, it is impossible to be entirely removed from personal influences that may impact the research (Guba, 1981; Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Nonetheless, I tried to clarify my personal background, experiences and relationship with the sectors both in the introduction and the next section of this dissertation. I discussed the steps I have taken to strive for neutrality and admit the usefulness of my personal knowledge and experiences within this research.

3.3.1 Researcher's Positionality

This research was particularly close to my personal experiences of education, meaning that I was both an insider and an outsider requiring me to participate in this research whilst occupying both of these contrasting positions simultaneously (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

As I had previously been educated in a FE College for two years prior to teaching in the same College for a further three years, I had experience teaching on the programmes I discussed during interviews. This enabled me to empathise with the FE sector's provision as an insider, which was useful in some interviews where there were hints of hostility because of my present status as a University student. This was useful for establishing a relationship with interviewees. It also helped persuade them of my understanding of their situation and shifted towards weakening the power dynamic between me as the interviewer and them as the interviewee (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002). However, I did not feel it was appropriate to disclose this information in all interviews, particularly those where FE was being criticised or individuals within the sector spoken about, as this may have caused complications or perhaps conflict within the interview (Hewitt-Taylor, 2002; Kanuha, 2000).

3.3.2 Ethical Considerations

This study received ethical approval from the Education Departmental Research Ethics Committee. I ensured that I continually adhered to all aspects of the British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2018) at all stages during my research.

To ensure interviewees were appropriately informed prior to the interview, they were sent an information sheet and consent was attained through the signing of a consent form prior to the interview. All recordings,

transcripts, records of consent and data used were securely stored in University-provided and maintained Cloud storage, Microsoft, or in the interviewer's password-protected laptop. All notes were anonymised with applicant IDs used instead of names and institutions referred to by pseudonyms. All research data and personal information were deleted once the research was finished, and consent forms will be deleted three years after publication in the Research Archives of the University of Oxford.

All participants had the right to withdraw their data, refuse to answer questions or stop the interview at any point of the process without question. No participants chose any of these options.

3.3 Limitations of this study

As this research was for a MSc dissertation with a word count limit of 20,000 the research that could be undertaken in the time allocated restricted the sample size. Due to time limits, it was only possible to interview 15 South-East England participants. Greater time would have allowed for a greater number of interviews to be conducted across the country, and therefore generalisability could have been possible. Due to the gap in the literature of the views from those within the sector this research also had to navigate this new approach which further limited the speed and thus size of research conducted.

Chapter 4: Analysis and Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will present the findings generated from the research conducted and data collected during this project; both the research and analysis will be discussed alongside each other to present the discussions in the clearest format, with findings presented at the end of the chapter. Based on the literature review, three research questions guided this research:

- 1) What is the present relationship between FE and HE, as viewed by those within the sector?
- 2) How might market logic impact the relationship between these two sectors?
- 3) What is the future of tertiary education in the FE sector?

This chapter will be structured into three sections according to the themes collated as a result of the research conducted and the findings from this research:

- 1) Competition and Collaboration
- 2) Choice
- 3) Identity

For each of the key themes, extracts from the interviews will be presented, analysed and discussed in relation to the broader question of the relationship between FE Colleges and Universities and where these relations may lead in the future.

These themes have been chosen for two reasons. First, because they were particularly prevalent in the research conducted with the vast number of interviewees spending considerable time on at least one of the themes when answering their questions. Secondly, these themes offer the richest

opportunity to contribute some thoughts to the discussion of the importance of this relationship for post-18 education in England.

The themes have been presented linearly so that each topic leads into a discussion of the next. This was chosen to present the findings from the individual relationships of the institutions, leading on to the idea of choice for students, and finally to the notion of identity and its significance as a guiding principle in the education system we have in England.

4.2 Competition and Collaboration

These two topics have been grouped together as each implies the absence, to a greater or lesser extent, of the other. Therefore, this section will discuss how FE Colleges and Universities see themselves as both competing and collaborating. Three topics were noted within this theme and offer some breakdown of the issues: quality of teaching, provision and competition. From the literature review, it was clear that the framing of FE and HE and the relationship between them within both funding and policy contexts was that of quasi-market logic. The student, as a consumer, is shopping around for their course and possibly being swayed by what the institutions' brands could offer.

As we shall go on to see, competition from the perspective of the FE participants seemed to revolve around the Colleges' feeling that they were competing on three levels: students, funding and prestige. The first is the most obvious; many FE participants felt that students were missing out on the provision they were offering as they did not realise the options available. Where Universities were often seen as the natural progression route, Colleges struggled to compete for students' attention. This reflected the findings from the literature review where Colleges were depicted as "hard to understand" (Richardson, 2007, p.411). If the government does not fully understand Colleges, then it is predictable that students would not either.

The second point of competition is funding. Colleges felt that the competition with Universities also involved funding, Universities were perceived to be the rich relatives and Universities widely acknowledged that Colleges simply did not have the funding or capital investment to be able to enrich their provision or support growth. With the market ideas discussed in the literature review relating to funding and the private and public good of the HE funding methods, Colleges felt that they were competing in a market but without the funding resources to provide real competition against Universities.

The last area of competition is prestige. Throughout the interviews, competition was highlighted through prestige, that Colleges felt they were second-class choices and University participants often gave scathing reviews of College offers. The latter strongly mirrors the quality discussion from within the literature review (Atkinson, 2011; Reay, 2017). FE participants freely shared their opinions about the inequality between the institutions and, although competing for students in some cases, admitted that they themselves would choose a University education over a college one simply because it sounded better. Additionally, the quality of teaching in FE was a focus for many University participants reflecting comments within the literature that there is considerable variety in the quality of professionals within the FE sector (Burkill et al., 2008; Feather, 2010, 2012; Reay, 2017; Wilson and Wilson, 2021, Wright et al., 2022)

It was stressed during the interview that all quotes would be anonymous and that I was interested in their own personal thoughts and opinions. Of the three themes, this theme provided the most personal insights into how those working within the sectors view themselves and others as market competitors. Even though it was one of the earliest questions within the interview, when I explained that I would like to know whether they feel they are competing with the other provider, almost without

exception, all FE participants said that they were, to some extent. All HE participants said they were not.

“Of course, we are competing they are challenging, coming into our market. [Institution name removed] are taking our degree apprenticeships, our students.” - FE1

“Yes, we are competing, yes, but competing for other people’s children. So that’s okay” - FE7

In contrast, when directly asked about the relationship that University leaders felt they had with FE Colleges, initially, almost all were positive that they were not competing.

“The landscape at the minute is messy and very unresolved. Students make choices at 16, if we are being realistic, that will guide them for life. We aren’t competing as students are given the choices...It’s either or.” - HE2

“We aren’t competing because they [FE Colleges] have never had the students, so we’re not taking them away [from the Colleges]” - HE6

These initial findings, therefore, seem to present a sufficiently clear picture that FE does indeed feel, as the literature review suggested, that it is the under-supported and forgotten sector, grappling for student numbers with Universities at the bottom end of the hierarchy (Brown, 2010) and Universities very much away from the competition with Colleges and focussing on their own interests (Norris, 2022; Duckworth and Smith, 2017). There are also clear indications of the market being a dominant thought for those within the sector that they are both in a marketplace and that students are the consumers that make the choices.

However, as interviews with University participants progressed, it was apparent that this lack of competition might not be so clean-cut. A theme

that quickly emerged was that Universities had chosen to deliver foundation year programmes because students were willing to pay for them, not necessarily because they felt that the provision was better in the University or, indeed, that the course was particularly relevant to the student.

“When we introduced foundation courses, we really didn’t think that they’d [the students] want to pay for a fourth year at University but since they do who are we to stop them spending their loans?” - HE1

Here, it is the consumers’, willingness to pay for the product that drove the University to provide the fourth year, the burden of fees clearly seen as a sound investment for the students for their own benefit. This reflects the importance of the neoliberal lens discussed in the literature review for understanding the student as consumer and thus the power that they possess to drive the quality of HE provision through competition (van Andel et al., 2012). The good to society of this provision is not a concern, highlighting the private good at play with the University offering this additional year (Barr, 2009; Marginson, 2018). When questions were asked that required a reflection upon the individual relationship of the interviewee’s own institutions with local rivals, or collaborators, an interesting shift soon emerged from the University participants. Rather than focusing on collaboration, two topics emerged regarding how the HE sector viewed the FE sector.

The first topic was the quality of teaching. It was consistently raised across five interviews with University participants that FE teachers did not undertake research as part of their employment. As such, an assumption was drawn that the quality of subject knowledge was lower in FE Colleges because of the lack of research reflecting concerns within the literature review (Burkill et al., 2008; Feather, 2010, 2012; Reay, 2017 Wilson and Wilson, 2021, Wright et al., 2022).

“All [FE] Colleges are trying to do is to keep the show on the road. They can’t be strategic because they just don’t have the time...They can teach and they can mark, but apart from that there is no chance, just isn’t space, for research and in the end that does fundamentally alter the quality that students will receive... I’m sorry but it just isn’t as good.” - HE3

The second topic that arose from the question of competition was that despite Universities suggesting that they are not in competition, they then provided various reasons why their offer was more appropriate than the FE College’s provision.

“FE loves to have HE about, they pride themselves on giving tours of their HE spaces, even though it’s just a small room in a corner somewhere, and they don’t really know what they’re doing” - HE3

“The aims of Colleges are just different, they aim for employment, get you a job at the end of it, not further study... The FE sector is purely vocational, it’s for, and it does deliver training rather than education. Training for a job not education for a future.” - HE5

The scathing comments from those within Universities really get to the centre of the relationship between Colleges and Universities, the total inequality and prestige economy that is at play within tertiary education in England. FE is the place of training and skills. Universities are the home of academia and research. This is only stratified further when the discussion of the supposed binary of academic and vocational is added to the attributes of the institutions. When discussing with a Leader in HE about the fundamental differences between the FE and HE sectors, an example was given of the division being either “vocationally or academically minded.” The participant then went on to say:

“I have never seen a College that does academic studies well... A vocation by definition means to serve to be handcuffed to a profession... That is the difference between Colleges and Universities, Colleges mean you lose the ability to transfer your skills. FE is just the course, that is all. HE carries much more; wider skill sets to be able to move and naturally learn.” - HE4

In no uncertain terms, the participant is reflecting the finding from the literature review that competition via a marketised system for tertiary education in England has led to these hostile and damning reflections on Colleges within the sector (Robson et al., 2021). The symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) against the FE institutions and, in turn, the students that attend them by University leaders is a brutal reflection of what the market structure has done to the relationships between educators. There is little room for support and collaboration in a market that requires institutions to compete for customers (van Andel et al., 2012). As a result, a prestige economy is played out with Universities certain of their status and superiority with little foundation, further reflected in the recent Government initiatives to encourage more apprenticeships, but undertaken at Universities not Colleges (Department for Education, 2023a)

Nonetheless, Colleges, it is evident, are still trying to adopt and conform to the patterns of the Universities in trying to carve out HE in Colleges exemplifying the mimetic isomorphism discussed within the literature review (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, Duckworth and Smith, 2017). However, the harsh reality is that they are perceived to be the poor, inadequate providers of a “vocation”. It is simply the place for “training for a job not education for a future” (HE, 5). This last comment is perhaps the most devastating, the implication that there is no future for students within the FE sector, only a job. If this is the case, which given the repeated comments from the University participants of similar views, then quite sadly, it is unclear how there can be a change made across society if educators are so freely willing to doom such a large proportion of young

people, first by considering a job as not being a future and secondly by confirming that the prestige economy is alive and kicking between these two sectors. The neoliberal ideals of a market improving quality appear to be simultaneously destroying the reputation of a sector, FE appears to be being squeezed out of the HE market by those in Universities through their damning analysis of the sector.

In one case, a FE participant suggested that their provision of HE was so inadequate that it should be removed. The funding of the tertiary system brought into question some of the inequalities faced by the FE and HE sector. Both FE and HE participants comment on the underfunding that they perceived FE Colleges to be working with and how, as such, they were viewed as working to survive rather than having room to plan strategically.

“At the risk of losing my job, I don’t think we should be delivering HE at all, we don’t have the staff or the space to deliver it well, and there is no chance for research, but the College needs the money so, of course, they are going to try and run these HE courses because they get £9000+ per pop, compared to about £4000 for other courses, and we need the money, we really need the money.” - FE2

If we reflect upon these two topics discussed from the first theme of the relationship between FE and HE it is clear that Universities place FE provision in an entirely different sphere from their own, and many Colleges seem complicit to accept this disparity. This can then produce two arguments, the first from FE Colleges that they are competing with Universities but on an unequal footing or a second that because this provision is so vastly different that students are able to make active choices as to which route “vocationally or academically minded” (HE4) they may be. This division between vocation and academia will be of particular interest when we consider the identity that FE Colleges and Universities prescribe for themselves and how meaning may come from this identity that leads to wider themes within the education sector.

4.2.1 Summary of present relationship, collaboration or competition

The present relationship between FE and HE rests more on the side of competition rather than collaboration, despite the initial reaction from the University participants. However, this competition manifests more in attitudes than in direct aims; as discussed, a division between vocation vs academia and training vs education highlights a chasm of difference between the sectors. What is particularly clear is that the findings from the literature review that a quasi-market ideology has engulfed tertiary education in England are very present in attitudes to Colleges, both from those within the sector and starkly from those in Universities (Ashwin, 2017; Ingleby, 2015). The binary of academic and vocational presented by those within both sectors as one of the major dividing features furthers the evidence from the literature review that the marketisation of education has perpetuated a social divide between Universities for *our children* and Colleges for *other people's children* (Richardson, 2007). Thus, driving the FE sector to both self-identity and perpetuate its identity as the training sector for jobs, not futures and careers (Duckworth and Smith, 2017).

When asked about competition, those from the FE sector were more inclined to accept this was a major factor commenting on the grand facilities and infrastructure available to students choosing to study at a University compared to what some deemed inadequate infrastructure at Colleges. Highlighting the funding inequalities noted within the literature review and particularly the focus on the funding structure promoting the private good of education rather than what Colleges can offer society (Wolf, 2015, Marginson, 2018). One FE Leader commented:

“Even [own institution name removed] have changed the Senior Leadership Team so that there is no one responsible for HE anymore because we can't provide it well enough, they're not bothered about it...We're fighting for any marketing materials and that recognition.” - FE2

A further FE Leader added to the discussion by presenting their view of the FE sector's ability to deliver HE:

"We teach 'somebody else's children' in a vocational space...the small amount of HE that we can do are career degrees, technical education." - FE3

The same participant later reflected on the competition felt between FE and HE and strongly suggested that foundation years (Year 0) should be stripped from universities.

"Year 0 is not value for money. Our Access to HE programmes are better and far more specific to the career and focussed. I mean also the loan is written off so it costs far less too...I don't think year 0 should be funded at all" - FE3

What is particularly prevalent from these topics is that those working within the FE sector feel that they are fighting a losing battle to persuade students to enrol on their provision against Universities that are better equipped and, in the opinion of many, better funded to support HE. The market has left Colleges unable to compete with the brand and products that Universities can sell to students, and it is abundantly clear that Universities are happy to work with a hard sell by playing on their prestige at the expense of Colleges. Sadly, many Colleges have no choice but to compete as HE funding is necessary for their survival. However, in the third theme, a shift begins to be seen concerning the future of the FE and HE relationships.

4.3 Choice

This theme emerged from the discussions with participants about how the current provision in FE and Universities provided students with a rich and

diverse landscape of choice for their studies. However, with greater choice, there was a greater opportunity for students of all socio-economic backgrounds and prior attainment to access the best provision for them. However, simply the choice being available was met with frustration that students needed to receive more guidance about their options. As such, many students were funnelled, sometimes unthinkingly, into UCAS and Universities rather than being informed of alternative routes through HE. Choices were available between academic and vocational, but this was a reductive division. The nuance of provision on offer from College education was lost under the training and skills agendas.

The resounding comment that came from both sectors is the lack of education about education. Both University and FE College participants were not adequately advising students on all the possible post-18 options. The murky waters of qualifications outside of the undergraduate degree route were presented as complex and challenging to understand (Norris, 2022; Richardson, 2007). One FE participant discussing UCAS gave an example:

“Schools love UCAS, they have UCAS lessons, UCAS workshops people come in from local universities to talk about UCAS but very rarely is there any mention of an alternative to A Levels and University... You go to school get your BBB [A Level grades] and go to a University and if you don't get your grades, you do a foundation year at the University.”- FE1

A similar conclusion was given by a participant from a University who commented:

“Provision at the minute, from the Government at least, is the tail wagging the dog, students, in the most part, want to study at a University for a degree because that is what they are told at school to do, you work hard you go to University you work hard, and you get a better job and a better wage.

Schools have not told students about the options that are possible to them.” - HE5

When these ideas are reflected upon about access, there is a gap between what the students want to gain, overall, a degree at a University, and what the Government tries to encourage Colleges to provide, HNCs/HNDs/ higher apprenticeships (Department for Education, 2019, Skills and Post-16 Education Act, 2022). Students are funnelled into degrees when there may be choices that they do not know about. This also linked to a theme repeatedly discussed: schools needed to sufficiently educate students about the opportunities available post-16, reflecting the recent Government initiative to improve advice and guidance (Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance, 2023).

When asked about the political landscape surrounding FE, all participants commented that they did not feel the Government was sufficiently knowledgeable about the sector and the options available for students.

“On the whole, the Government doesn’t understand the sector and I think that’s because very few people in Government have actually been through it themselves, to be able to understand the nitty gritty of the sector.” - FE6

The topic of lack of personal experience from those leading education policy, particularly Ministers, was also a repeated topic, with many using this to highlight the proverbial notion that FE is for ‘other people’s children’ (Richardson, 2007; Duckworth and Smith, 2017). This, again, links back to the issue discussed in the literature review that FE is deemed to be important and valuable for creating skilled employees, but what exactly it does is unclear to many in power, with its purpose reduced to skills and training (Duckworth and Smith, 2017).

With such complexity and, perhaps, confusion, it is possible to draw out an argument that the current provision from Colleges and Universities is, in some ways, preventing the greatest access to tertiary for learners, as

many learners are not aware of the options available to them and where these choices may lead. Even if the courses are available, there is no clear evidence that the right students are joining the right courses. This was highlighted in a discussion with a University Leader who commented that they were planning to withdraw all their foundation year provision and send it back to Colleges as students who joined at that level had a considerably lower chance of success on that course and attaining the degree programme.

“We are undertaking these discussions because there is a big dropout rate after the foundation year...students that come in with low-grade qualifications, generally, this carries over into their degrees because they have chosen the wrong course to start with.” - HE5

This reflects the view of the Government shown with the stark cutting of fees for foundation years from £9250 to £5760 (Department for Education, 2023b). With, often, limited advice being given to students at school, UCAS and thus University is seen as the normal progression route leading to students entering into four-year courses and either leaving before competition or perhaps undertaking a course that was not most suited to their needs or goals.

Thus, although participation in HE is at a record high, this does not necessarily mean that students are participating in courses that offer them the most benefit and best learning experience. Nonetheless, degrees are the currency that the market appears to crave and therefore, Colleges seem to be obliged to fight in this market space for their own survival. This idea has been repeated in reviews of tertiary education in England and very recently in the Department for Education’s suggestion that *rip-off degrees* would be capped (Wolf, 2015, Department for Education, 2019, Department for Education 2023b). A hard balance to achieve but one that the participants within the research largely felt is not being struck.

4.3.1 Tertiary and Choice

From the discussions of choice, the question of whether a tertiary sector, rather than a FE and HE option, was posed to the participants to help guide students. Would one sector rather than two help with understanding? The opinion on using “tertiary” as a term for the post-school sector were mixed. Some participants chose to reference other countries, mainly Germany and Australia, to discuss the merits of a tertiary system but then quickly added that it was not simply the name that was different in those systems but far greater systematic differences throughout their education systems. Other participants felt they would not object to the term but worried that no one else would understand it.

“Yeah, it’s fine to use tertiary if you want but I personally don’t think students or parents or employers will really know what it is. New names for old things are hard to navigate, look at [name of institution removed] it is still the Poly [polytechnic] and will be until generations that knew any other are no longer around.” - FE5

Where attitudes to *tertiary* were most negative was from FE participants who felt their identity would be even further eroded by taking on this term. They feared that a tertiary system, which included Universities, would become a synonym for University.

“Tertiary would remove Colleges altogether. We’re already not recognised at all [by the Government] so if they gave us another name we would be completely lost.” - FE2

The same participant later commented on the branding of tertiary education:

“I wouldn’t have wanted to go to tertiary education, I wanted to go to a University, I went to University [not College] because it sounds a lot nicer.” - FE2

The apprehension of having a tertiary sector appears to revolve around status; the status of the FE Colleges may be lost within this proposed larger sector and the status of Universities being pooled in with Colleges. This worry reflects the concerns in the literature review about the boundaries between Colleges and Universities providing the FE sector with a defence against the symbolic violence they may feel they have faced and thus, the victimhood they embrace (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Jacoby, 2014). Definition, as outlined in the literature review, is a powerful feature of the market identity of Colleges and Universities. Colleges became defensive against this change when they were threatened with identity erosion because of the inequality they perceived they would continue to face.

However, not all opinions on this were negative. Many University participants suggested they would embrace the term, with one proposing that we were already there.

“We’ve spoken about blurring, which is exactly what tertiary would be, so in that respect, I think we’re already there, there is very little difference between provision, some provision, in Colleges and what we [a University] offer. So yes, go for it, I would be in favour of tertiary, so long as the funding follows.” - HE3

This extract from a Vice Chancellor of a previous polytechnic University highlights both the view that there is a collaboration between the institutions as they were enthusiastic about joining together under the one umbrella term but also an awareness that there are complex funding allocations that need to be addressed if FE and HE were brought together. This difference in attitudes may further support the literature, which suggested that the market perpetuated a power dynamic between Universities based upon neo-institutional theory and prestige economics (Brown, 2010). Here we can see how Universities see themselves as powerful enough to be unfazed by joining FE Colleges. The blurring of their boundaries is not a concern. Whereas for the Colleges, this

represents a loss of their identity and erosion of their victim status, perhaps alluding to a denial of their lived experiences as being the forgotten sector and the hardships that come with this.

The funding of a hypothetical tertiary sector appears to be the most pressing concern for participants from both present sectors. FE participants were concerned that their funding is already strapped and to be pooled into a larger sector may mean that the Universities and the prestigious degrees could suck even more funding away from the qualifications offered in the Colleges. Secondly, some University participants appeared hesitant about a tertiary system where their own reputation may be diminished.

“In principle, I could see a tertiary system working as long as the quality of teaching in Colleges is up to scratch and it would be far more difficult to gain recognition in a tertiary sector as opposed to College/University, in so far as an integration of FE and HE, that would be fine so long as retardation was avoided.” - HE5

Yet again, the University is concerned about its own status and prestige against the poor quality they perceive to exist in the FE sector, with no apparent reasoning, to suggest that “retardation” is a concern is a devastating judgement against the FE sector.

From these findings, there appears to be some willingness to engage with tertiary education in England but how exactly this would work with both funding systems, and to ensure that the reputation and identity of institutions is preserved are complex issues to navigate. The latter of these is perhaps most keenly associated with the result of a market system leading to Colleges seeing themselves as victims, and this victimhood leads to a keener dependency on boundaries as a safety net for protection and self-preservation in a heightened way because of the harm they can perceive to be felt because of policy and funding structures.

4.3.2 Future of choices within tertiary education

This second theme offered considerable hopefulness about the thought of tertiary education. An idea worthy of discussion was a model of Universities adopting FE Colleges to provide more support and structure for both students and educators.

During one interview, a University participant offered the idea that all Universities should be obliged to “adopt” a FE College.

“We need to think about FE and HE together, in that respect, we must think tertiary, not separate but one education for adults...We could join FE and HE, each University could take on, adopt, a FE College for say an extra £1,000 per year per undergraduate, so for £10,500 per year, with that uplift Universities then have responsibility for a College.” - HE3

This proposition was then offered to the participants that followed. As expected, reactions were mixed. Most FE participants felt that this would not be successful for their own institution, suggesting that they would only further lose their identity to the fame of the University and undergraduate degree. Others were concerned that by doing this, what small uniqueness they could offer within the education sector, between school and University, would be diminished further, and students would be left with only the choice to attend the University. However, this showed a lack of awareness of their own striving to amalgamate with University structures, such as providing degrees and HE, effectively starting to remove their uniqueness anyway and reflecting the mimetic isomorphism noted in the literature review (Robson et al., 2021).

Reservations were also held when the University’s reputation was considered. One University participant noted that some Universities may

wish to choose the calibre of the College that they adopted with a second echoing these concerns.

“We would consider partnering FE Colleges if the quality could be assured and if we were confident that we would develop the curriculum, then we would be keen...At the end of the day it is all education, and a mini ecosystem of tertiary education could have real benefits.” - HE6

“I would imagine Universities would want to choose which College they adopt. I can’t imagine Oxford [University] would want to adopt Oxford City College, but a nice selective Sixth Form in the middle of nowhere, I’m sure they’d be very happy with that. That’s the issue, it might work for non-Red-Brick universities where their reputation is less important but not for others.” - HE4

These extracts show that, in principle, there may be support for adoption. However, in practice, each College and University has vast complications and nuances. It needs to be clarified how to satisfy such a complex system of unique institutions. Furthermore, the Universities are still primarily concerned about their prestige and reputation over and above the access to HE they could offer or the support they could give students to access appropriate education. The market ideas here of competing and protecting their brand have trumped the public good that education can offer.

The theme most prevalent is identity, both the Colleges and Universities are aware of their identity and status, with neither willing to sacrifice these aspects. As noted with the University participant who outlined the plans to give Year 0 provision over to the local FE College as a tool to maintain their University’s standards, there is an acute awareness of rankings and where they can remove students that may lower overall achievement and success, reflecting findings from the literature review

and the importance of ranking and prestige in market logic (Brown, 2010; Locke, 2009; Marginson 2016).

4.4 Identity

The last and, perhaps, most insightful aspect of this research was the repeated meta-narrative of identity, which will be discussed in two ways through the blurring of boundaries and meaning of identity. Whether in the concern for the lack of identity that those within the FE sector discussed in relation to the Government or the inability to form an identity because of insufficient funding for marketing or to raise student awareness of the offer available at FE Colleges. The identity concerns for Universities to ensure that their students achieve well and the need to protect their reputation and rankings. All of these discussions tie into the notion of identity. However, this issue is not as simple as a brand or credibility. There are much wider concepts at play the first of which is represented by the enthusiasm or reluctance to blur boundaries between Colleges and Universities.

4.4.1 Blurring of boundaries, loss of identity

During each interview, I asked the participant to reflect on the blurring of boundaries between FE and HE provision. Unlike the question of competition or collaboration, there was less consistency in the replies given by those from the two sectors. Where this term was taken to mean the blurring of what could be offered to the students in relation to experience, progression or course content, there was a clearer certainty that the two sectors offered very different options for students, and there was little blurring. However, when this was prompted as a discussion of reflecting on post-18 options, there was more willingness to see Colleges and Universities as offering highly similar provision although this was still hard to define.

Two definitions were of particular significance, one from a HE interview and one from a FE interview. In the HE interviews a clear definition was offered of FE relating to the history of the sector, pre-1982 Polytechnics' role in the education sector and post-16 education (HE2). In contrast, one FE participant simply stated that "there isn't a definition of FE, it's just what doesn't fit anywhere else" (FE2). Here the participant within the FE sector presents a far less certain understanding of the place and role of the sector than someone on the outside. This appears to fly in contrast to the literature considered where the FE sector is often portrayed as the less-understood half of the HE providers by those on the outside, here it is those on the inside too (Richardson, 2007)

With the hardship in determining the definition and place of Colleges, there was implicit and explicit support offered for the notion that FE and HE are blurring with some splitting the offer by academic and vocational or training and education. However, to identify a clean-cut was near impossible. When asked, some felt it was unnecessary and potentially harmful to create a division between the sectors.

"It is entirely inappropriate to have a clean line between them [FE and HE]...that doesn't work for many communities. What is appropriate is to have a student focus, that is key...There isn't an absolute dichotomy and there shouldn't be because we need both to be able to work more closely together" - HE5

Therefore, despite the debate around competition or collaboration, it seems that both sides can agree that it is very hard to define the FE sector and as such the blurring of boundaries is apparent. Indeed, it is necessary for there to be a blurring to provide students with more opportunities in whichever sector they choose to engage with. It is necessary to provide as many options as possible for students to engage with at all levels. However, once this area was pressed, provision vs engagement emerged. When discussing employers, it was noted on

several occasions that the currency of education that employers can understand is a degree.

“Until employers know what a HND or HNC or any other combination of letters are they are going to favour the degree, simply because they know what that is, and the same for parents.” - FE4

What this highlighted was that the number of options for post-18 education could be plentiful but until they were commonly recognised the focus was on the degree and thus many options were left out to dry.

Together with the literature discussed in chapter four, we have seen in this chapter the complex structures that leave FE Colleges searching high and low for funding to survive. It is good to note that the hesitancy of Colleges to lose their identity by joining a tertiary system seems to conflict in some manner with the isomorphism theory discussed in the literature review (Robson et al. 2021). Colleges, therefore, appear to be both enthusiastic about taking on the shape and some of the attributes, norms and values of Universities whilst still trying to hold on to their own FE identity. This suggests that there is less enthusiasm for blurring boundaries from Colleges than Universities, as discussed in the literature review and the victim status attached to boundaries (Jacoby, 2014). However, this may also relate to the symbolic violence that some Colleges experience from policy and the views of University peers meaning that they see themselves as victims in the sector, and to lose their identity to a tertiary system would mean that they had lost their fight entirely (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

4.4.2 What is the meaning of identity?

It is evident that identity is leading many of the discussions that are relevant to answer the issue posed for this research project, but what is

this idea of identity and where does it point to is perhaps the best approach to understanding what is being said.

Identity initially seemed to revolve around the unique provision that the institutions could offer, because of this identity, the institution felt they could add value. Identity was also interwoven with definitions. The University participants were clear on what a University was and how it could be defined. In contrast, as we saw earlier in this chapter, many in FE struggled to define their sector. If a definition was attempted, it seemed to be either a list of the courses offered or a negative definition of what it was not, not school and not University. As a society, we use definitions as a tool to provide identity and meaning creation. If we look at the philosophy of language, the debate appears of the influence of language on thought, the weaker version of linguistic relativity, if we do not have the language to express something, can we think about it in a sufficient way and does the language we speak shape the way that we look at the world around it (Ahearn, 2012). Therefore, if we struggle to define FE, and particularly those within the sector if they find it hard to define their own sector, then how are they thinking about it? Perhaps this relates to the ideas of the Government not understanding FE, perhaps because they do not have the definition to understand what the sector is exactly.

If we do not have a definition to offer, then other forms of identity are sought and meaning created. The first we can note is comparing Colleges to Universities by proposing vocation and academia as the dividing line. This is nothing new. However, perhaps this division is more akin to seeking to define one's reality. If we do not have the language to express our reality, then perhaps the FE sector is latching on to the closest that it can offer, this binary divide. However, this divide points us to an interesting neoliberal attitude toward market forces. Working in a market requires establishing a brand and offering a product. We have seen above the importance of brand. Thus, the reputation of both the FE Colleges and Universities is crucial. Still, if these are both hard to establish, as the FE

participants suggested, then meaning must be created by other means. The meaning that was created, through a lack of identity by definition, was to use the courses and qualification, the process, to provide an identity. Here then, not only can we see neoliberal ideas of competition, independence and identity, but we could further look at Colleges and Universities as working for two parts of society, vocational training and academic education, An education system for other people's children aimed at training and skills seems increasingly linked to critiques of a two-class structure where education plays the role of securing and perpetuating the status quo of social order (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, Thatcher et al. 2015).

However, these ideas are contrary to the suggested place of FE Colleges offering more opportunities for participation in education and the rhetoric of the necessity of the FE sector to promote skills and training for all through lifelong learning opportunities. However, if these opportunities are viewed as tools to provide a workforce sufficiently educated for a shifting society which needs more technical knowledge than ever, this may tie in with Government initiatives (Department for Education, 2023c). Recently, this week at the time of writing, the Government announced the promotion of further degree apprenticeships for medicine as a pathway into the medical profession. Here, seemingly is the joining together of medicine as a vocation, in its original Latin sense as a lifelong calling, and the academic degree joining the apprenticeship, thus providing an amalgamation of the two sectors. However, that is not to say that the FE sector will be able to deliver these degrees; when this idea before publication was discussed with FE participants, many applauded the initiative but could not provide the infrastructure to support delivery. Therefore, despite the branding, there seems to be still maintained a preference towards University HE, even for vocational apprenticeships. Therefore, this further embeds the disparity of esteem and inequalities within tertiary education but also the blurring of the academic and

vocational division identified as a binary in the literature review (Duckworth and Smith, 2017).

To return to the issue of identity, many of the College participants rejected the idea of Universities adopting Colleges because of their loss of identity. This points to a wider debate about which identity they hope to achieve, one of uniqueness or one that fits the market structure they seem to be in competition with.

If this is the status quo, how can FE Colleges be supported? The outlier to the FE participants was one College where the interviewee was adamantly in favour of collaboration, could see the benefits and would be enthusiastic to be adopted by a University and actively sought to offer provision distinct and not in competition with the local University. The College this participant spoke from was a recent creation from the merger of two local Colleges that had been competing with each other and the local University. As Principal, this participant was encouraged by the Governing Body to form a College not in competition but specifically to collaborate. When speaking to a participant from the University mentioned here, this view was repeated: due to poor relationships and competition with the previous Colleges, this new College was encouraged to work with the University. The University participant revealed that the University had been approached with the suggestion of taking over the College but declined this to avoid a monopoly within the area of students attending the University only from that College.

The example above is very useful for our reflection of identity outside of the marketised system many discussed. It is an example of two institutions working actively to provide for all students without the need for competition, as a “public service and public good” - FE4. The College and University both felt that they were actively and successfully collaborating to provide what the local community required. This is the closest example within this research of what could happen if the market

force was removed from the HE and FE debate. Two institutions are unique but provide complimentary provision as it is needed, not for income or survival but to provide an appropriate level of educational opportunities. However, recently the Mayor of Manchester, Andy Burnham, proposed plans for a Manchester Baccalaureate aimed at a similar collaborative approach (Greater Manchester Combined Authority, 2023). However, the Education Secretary, Gillian Keegan, added that the Mayor did not have the authority for this, and she opposed regional variations in educational provision (Education for 11-16 Year Olds Committee, 2023). Therefore, suggesting that even if there is support from those within the sector that does not mean the policy support will follow.

Nonetheless, this relationship indicates that there is the opportunity, or indeed hope, of a tertiary education system that provides the education that society and local communities need through collaboration. Rather than grasping after financial opportunities which could leave students without the education choices they need. This system, whether formalised through a College being adopted by a University or more informally, perhaps with exclusive relationships, appears to be the most sustainable for both Universities and Colleges and the most likely to provide the richest opportunities for access to HE. What is significant here is that it is the removal of market logic which provided the richest offer for the community and two institutions aware of the need to support the community above their own profits and sought to deliver complimentary provision for the public good, ensuring they worked with local schools to advise about all the options available to students.

4.5 Overview of Findings

This research set out to address three research questions: What is the present relationship between FE and HE, as viewed by those within the sector? How might market logic impact the relationship between these

two sectors? What is the future of tertiary education in the FE sector? These provided the foundations for the research that then produced three key themes within the findings: competition and collaboration, choice, and identity. The last of these themes appear to offer the most significant analysis of why the FE and HE sectors may interact in the way they do and how external ideologies and meta-structures greatly influence the day-to-day education that students receive.

The theme of competition or collaboration sought to present what those within the two sectors felt about their present relationship with each other. Unsurprisingly, there was a mixed response from participants, some extolling the virtues of their close collaborations, others bemoaning the friction and competition they face, and others simply offering their opinion that they were in separate spheres and had little in common.

Despite these differing viewpoints, the most common thread was to suggest that the present relationship is based upon market ideals and goals. Both Colleges and Universities depend on students as consumers and deliver their courses as products to be bought by students for their own private good. Particularly relevant was how unequal this competition was deemed to be by both sectors but that it was necessary for Colleges to try to compete for their own survival. The underfunded and misunderstood College participants felt that they were striving for the impossible due to the economic necessity to acquire HE tuition fees despite their often-insufficient ability to deliver this provision. Most obvious in the debate was the scathing attitudes of University participants to the perceived quality and ability of Colleges to provide HE. Here is evidence of the result of the market logic that has created a fierce competitive structure where Universities have the prestige to rely on and only further work to secure that prestige by belittling their competition.

With the second theme of choice, inequality also stood out sharply. In John Cleese, Ronnie Barker and Ronnie Corbett's famous sketch about social

class, the participants commented on the social class that they looked down to or up to, this was an analogy very present when considering the relationship these institutions have. Whether the issue was funding, expertise, quality of provision or infrastructure, it was abundantly clear that FE Colleges looked up to Universities and Universities via a neo-institutional theory framework were confident in looking down on their FE Colleagues, sometimes in quite shockingly harsh terms. The openness with which this occurred was surprising when discussing the participant's institutions and the other sector. Even when Colleges were offering HE courses and Universities offering foundation years there was little restraint used to highlight their inferiority in the case of Colleges and superiority in the case of Universities. With Universities confident of the prestige attached to their provision, some FE participants were happy to agree with the secondary nature of their offering.

As discussed, the last theme of identity offered the richest insight into the broader narrative at play. However, the question that comes from these findings in relation to identity is what are the future options? A topic for the final chapter.

Chapter 5: Contributions of the study to research and practice

This study set out to add to the discussion of the relationship between FE Colleges and Universities by obtaining the views and opinions of those within the two sectors. Although there was literature on the two sectors and some on the overlap between them, there was little about how they viewed their competitors or colleagues and the impact of market structures on these relationships. Therefore, this study aimed to add to the field by looking at these relationships. From this study, it is clear that out of the three themes identified (competition and collaboration, choice, and identity) the notion of identity within a quasi-market was the most pressing for all participants, it is this point which may offer the most to the field.

5.1 The impact of identity

The findings of this study highlight how Colleges and Universities are vastly different entities within the tertiary sector. Simply by looking at the question of competition or collaboration provided almost a unanimous opinion from each of the sectors, FE felt they were competing, and Universities presented themselves as collaborating. With the one exception of the College that was merged to avoid competition, many other FE participants highlighted their unease of competing on what they deemed to be an unequal footing against Universities simply to secure their funding for survival. This is not particularly new. However, the theme that may add to the debate is the issue of definition and, thus, identity within a market and the implications of this for the relationship between Colleges and Universities.

Surprisingly, almost all FE participants stumbled and struggled to define their sector. Many resorted to highlighting that it was neither a school nor a University, and some proceeded to give a detailed outline of their

provision, but a definition was blatantly absent. Some participants struggled with the notion of a definition for their sector, perhaps questioning my own knowledge or why it was necessary. If a sector cannot define itself, how can it know its identity within a market?

In contrast, University leaders were able to list the goals of a University, what it could add to society the specialisms that can be fostered within it. This further highlighted the fragility of the FE sector, struggling to define itself, let alone defend itself against what was sometimes seen as the impending doom of Universities taking its students.

Whilst grasping for an identity, FE College participants highlighted how the market was the driving force behind their decisions; with the need to focus on funding and income, courses were dropped, staff hours were stripped back, with no room left for research, consolidation or future strategic work. The market shaped the future far more than the guiding hand of educators. This leads to the need to reflect on how much of this identity crisis impacts the way that outsiders think of FE. For a Cinderella sector, it could be hard to raise awareness of its work when what exactly it is, is left to individuals to discern. Without an identity, it is hard to gain status or credibility.

The wider debate reflected in these identity issues is the concern over branding, the market and, ultimately, the capitalist ideals at play. Colleges bemoaned the funding restrictions impacting their outreach, marketing campaigns and presence, tools which would somehow magically reinvigorate the sector. The brand over the content was a resounding notion. It highlighted the importance of a voice that Colleges felt they were losing as they saw themselves as a victim to the market structures. This may be the biggest warning bell that this research could sound for the future of tertiary education, are Universities only succeeding because they have established a monopoly over the customer, a prestige through their branding that may not be entirely legitimate? The students, parents,

schools and employers can understand the degree product, want to invest in those who have it and look with confusion at alternate offers. The capitalist ideals of a free market are cripplingly obvious. In this sense, whether universities will accept it or not, there is clearly nothing but competition at play, with the stakes of £9,250+ per year for each student.

The ideals of a tertiary sector and the small example within this study of the manufacturing of an ecosystem that supports learners without competition hold a small beacon of hope for students to be supported onto the most appropriate learning path. However, the major issue to be addressed is how to secure a recognisable identity for the FE sector so that it can then gain a place in the market we presently have, not only for consumers to understand its offer but for itself to have a definition to be proud of and a brand to stand behind, both of which it is lacking in its present state.

5.2 Concluding thoughts

After conducting this research, the most surprising result was the sad state of FE in England, as it saw itself as the victim in a system it could not fight against, struggling to find a voice, let alone identity, whether that is because of its perceived reputation from many University participants or the attitude from FE participants who felt that the sector was little more than limping towards its decline through lack of funding, lack of definition and lack of interest from those who could help. Despite grand claims that Colleges could offer access to more students and supports skills needed in both society and the economy, there seemed to be little thought as to how this would be achieved. A sector that could be transformative for so many young people, providing an adaptive, engaging education that leads to good careers, is on its knees with little hope that it will be fixed and even less understanding of the nuances of its provision outside of the vocational training and skills discourse repeatedly and, perhaps, unthinkingly attached to it.

However, this is more than just an issue for the sector or even for those who can support it, whether that is from the Government, employers or Universities but is a much greater social question, is it acceptable for the market to lead education? This is the biggest question to take away, whether we are happy for a market economy based upon branding and identity to be the driving force of an education system, with the less prestigious trampled for the sake of customers. If we are happy with this result, then the place for FE Colleges may be coming to an end, and instead, degree apprenticeships through Universities may lead the way. However, there is a chance for a true reflection on this model and for providers to work together for the betterment of society rather than the private good. In that case, FE Colleges do have hope for the future to support learners who are not best placed to learn in a University but would benefit from the bespoke support and care available in a College environment. This should be the definition that FE looks for, caring Colleges with the space and opportunity to support students to thrive, whatever their career may lead to, for furthering education for all.

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