Association of Colleges

Breaking the Mould
Creating higher education fit for the future
Foreword

In its 2013 publication, *Skills Beyond School in England*, the OECD remarked upon the relative absence of a post-secondary technical and vocational system focusing on higher level skills below degree level. At the same time, successive annual reports by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) and others have pointed to a growing shortage of technicians in the workforce. Although there is no generally accepted definition of a technician, most studies align the skills gap with provision that is below a full honours degree, but includes A Level equivalent vocational qualifications and above.

A series of reports published over the last 70 years have identified the different means by which this technician gap could be addressed, including the Robbins Report of 1963 and a 1966 white paper which ultimately led to the establishment of polytechnics. It might be argued that each of these initiatives fell foul of the ‘gravitational pull’ towards the academic in our education system; based on deeply ingrained class bias and/or the desire for increased institutional autonomy, remote from direct influence by employers or politicians.

Despite these post-war attempts to break the mould the traditional academic model continues to hold sway in England - as evidenced by the OECD report. The dramatic decline in the recruitment of mature students in higher education is partly related to this model.

If, however, awareness of a problem is the first step in finding a solution, there is now a growing consensus across the political parties and business community that we must address the imbalance between higher technical and vocational education and traditional academic provision. Failure to do so will threaten sustained economic recovery and risk undermining the prosperity and economic fulfilment of both young and old.

This document aims to further stimulate debate concerning higher technical and vocational education, concentrating upon the contribution that England’s further education colleges seek to make in closing the emerging skills gap. It is a mission that they have held in trust, despite restrictions imposed by a lack of funding and market restrictions, but one that they seek to grow as a matter of national priority.

Martin Doel OBE
Chief Executive
The History of Colleges: Local, Technical, Vocational and Comprehensive

Colleges have a proud history spanning 200 years that is built on two primary foundations.

Firstly, their roots lie in 19th century education and training organised by and for working people in their communities. These organisations were exemplified by mutual improvement societies, co-operatives, temperance organisations and other associational movements.

Secondly, colleges’ origins are in education sponsored by employers, philanthropists and social reformers to develop craft skills, applied science and practical work-related subjects, as well as liberal education for working class people, particularly artisans and craftsmen.

From the early 20th century, colleges became part of local authority education. Their core provision included sandwich courses, apprenticeship education and ‘night school’ for people in work, leading to vocational qualifications.

As the system of Higher National Certificates (HNCs) and Diplomas (HNDs) was widely developed in the 1960s, colleges began to offer vocational programmes to sub-degree level. Gareth Parry from the University of Sheffield estimates that by the late 1970s, colleges were enrolling almost as many students on higher education (HE) courses as the 29 polytechnics.

This position quickly changed in the late 1980s and early 1990s as polytechnics and universities were encouraged by Government to significantly expand their provision, which led to a proportionate decrease in HE provision in colleges. In 1994, this was halted after significant increases in enrolments in former polytechnics led to the Government needing to control costs.

The legacy of these reforms is a HE system dominated by full-time three-year residential degrees leaving part-time and higher technical and vocational education less prominent and supported.

A number of influential organisations, including the OECD, CBI, TUC and Policy Exchange agree England has a weak higher technical and vocational education system. The present system for the validation and award of HE qualifications is based on an academic model, founded on the principles of a university education developed in the 19th century and an infrastructure predating the internet and rapid globalisation.
City and Islington College

City and Islington College have provided training in ophthalmic dispensing for 40 years, and is a recognised leader in the UK offering these qualifications.

Students of the foundation degree and level 6 diploma are provided with theoretical and practical tuition, including industry standard equipment donated by ophthalmic dispensing companies. This allows students to gain experience in a realistic working environment.

Teaching staff continue to work in optical practices and hospitals on a part-time basis, to keep their knowledge up-to-date and ensure that students receive tuition from well-informed professionals.

Warwickshire College

Warwickshire College has been delivering HE in engineering for over 20 years, developing foundation degrees to meet regional and national needs. The college has developed the curriculum to allow students to specialise in a range of areas such as automotive, electrical and mechanical engineering.

The college innovatively incorporates apprenticeship frameworks into their engineering HE curricular in two ways: a foundation degree or HNC, as the second half of a four year advanced apprenticeship; or a foundation degree at the start of a higher apprenticeship. This system allows straightforward progression from one level to the next.

Part of the success of the programme is the personalised model of delivery: employers work directly with college curriculum managers to agree the most relevant modules and programme pathway for each employee.
North Hertfordshire College

North Hertfordshire College’s foundation degree in fashion and textiles is based around creative integration of styles, with an emphasis on using cutting edge materials and processes.

Students benefit from working to live briefs with companies, including designing for online fashion outlets. They work directly with senior designers to develop their ideas within commercial constraints, giving them a realistic understanding of working in the profession.

Each year, students have a chance to get involved in a range of activities, such as showcasing their designs and finished outfits on the catwalk at the national Clothes Show Live event.
Inventing the Divide

The 1990s saw a further decline in the provision of higher technical and vocational education. Polytechnics became universities, colleges lost ground amid funding changes and students who might previously have followed a vocational path progressed into academic degrees featuring an expensive full-time ‘student experience’.

These, and later policies, have led to a two-tier tertiary system with the assumption that further education (FE) would primarily concentrate on courses below degree level. The changes have downgraded higher technical and vocational education and damaged local progression routes. More recently, there has been a catastrophic decline in part-time provision in universities in particularly.

This artificial divide has arguably compounded England's weaknesses in educating and training people for intermediate and advanced level technical skills. Many HE qualifications are arguably not fit for purpose:

- Too many university vocational degrees are overly academic with insufficient skills elements.
- Some foundation degrees have limited employer involvement.
- Many HNCs/Ds are generic and have insufficient rigour and quality assurance.
- Non-prescribed HE, which covers higher level professional awards provided by national awarding bodies, exists in a hinterland with an adoptive parent, the Skills Funding Agency (SFA), unable to provide any support.

Higher apprenticeships are a development in the right direction and have political capital, but need support.

There is a real need to make sure that our higher technical and vocational education system meets the advanced skills needs of the country both now and in the future. The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, Vince Cable MP, agrees:

"High-level vocational training has fallen through the gap between our HE and FE systems... relative to other countries, we are way behind where we need to be...we need to fill that high-level vocational gap."
Craven College

Craven College offers HE courses in air transport and aviation management, based at a dedicated Aviation Academy.

What is unusual about the academy is that it is situated ‘airside’ on a protected site at Leeds/Bradford International Airport. From the moment the students enter they are a part of the aviation sector and are made fully aware of important industry concerns, such as security and safety issues.

At a curriculum level the students benefit from the expertise of the staff as the programme is taught by former air transport professionals, including an Airport Director, an Airline Operations Manager and pilots.

Vision West Nottinghamshire College

Vision West Nottinghamshire College’s Higher National Diploma in interactive media provides students with real experiences of developing work-based projects. The course offers state of the art resources to explore a range of media types including animation, website design, post production and editing in a professional setting.

The key to making this come alive for students is genuine employer engagement. Alongside sessions in cultural theory and critical thinking, students work on projects for national companies, such as Arsenal FC and JCB, and local firms. This unique insight into commercial design work allows students to develop a full understanding of what faces them when they enter the workforce.
The college sector awards 34% of all vocational qualifications and 44% of all level 3 (A Level equivalent) qualifications. These qualifications such as Bradford College’s level 3 Diploma in Pharmaceutical Science are crucial for developing intermediate technical skills and also provide the pipeline to further higher level study.

Colleges enrol 130,000 HE students, about 10% of the HE undergraduate market, with approximately 60,000 students studying part-time professional certificates and diplomas. The majority of these are studying foundation degrees and HNCs/Ds.

Almost 300 colleges offer HE, ranging from less than 100 students to more than 3,000. In some medium sized towns without a university, such as Grimsby, Blackpool, Blackburn and Truro, the local college is effectively providing a university service. In other towns with national and international facing universities such as Durham, Bradford and Hull, the FE college provides a HE service for local people.

In many market towns, such as Skipton, Mansfield and Peterborough, colleges provide a vital HE service for people unable to access a local university due to family and childcare commitments or high transport costs. Around 52% of college HE students only apply for one course at one institution and 70% live within 25 miles of the college campus.

Some colleges also offer more specialised courses, which are essential for local businesses. Land-based colleges offer 40% of HE courses that concentrate in that specific vocational area. Hartpury College, for example, offer higher level training in game and fish management, which meets the needs of the local economy.

Alongside this, higher vocational education is available at several sixth form colleges, such as Peter Symonds College in Winchester which offers, among others, foundation degrees in early years for people wishing to work with children.

Recent research commissioned by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) indicates that most of the college HE provision is vocationally orientated, half of which is provided on a part-time basis. The study also found that the major factors influencing college HE student enrolment is accessibility and controlling living costs whilst studying. Colleges also attract proportionately more students from lower participation neighbourhoods than universities.
Colleges’ Higher Technical and Vocational Mission

Colleges in England are committed to:

- Providing a flexible higher vocational education service to their communities;
- Providing internal HE progression opportunities for their students;
- Recruiting students from areas with low HE participation rates and without a family history of HE;
- Higher skills formation and local economic regeneration;
- Developing higher apprenticeships;
- Providing an impartial information and careers advice service; and
- Working with universities to increase HE participation.

A recent success story

Change in UK and other EU entrants to full-time undergraduate courses by higher education institution (HEI) groupings.
Blackpool and The Fylde College

Blackpool and The Fylde College School of Maritime Operations is internationally renowned for its provision in this vocational area.

Marine engineering courses were developed in the college as a response to the needs of shipping companies and related marine industries. The college works closely with the Merchant Navy and other trans-national employers, to ensure the training and qualifications provided are in line with the requirements of an exacting industry.

The courses have several innovative features to take account of the needs of the industry such as flexible and blended delivery patterns. This includes enrolling students onto a sandwich, foundation degree or HNC programme, consisting of both college and sea phases.
Bradford College

Bradford College provides higher level students with the opportunity to study on a truly international programme, as part of the Bradford Whistling Woods International Film School.

The school, which delivers undergraduate and postgraduate programmes specialising in film production, photography and animation, was opened in 2013 in partnership with the Whistling Woods Institute in India.

This unique collaboration offers students the chance to visit and study at the campus in Mumbai, as well as develop the skills and academic rigour needed to be in a strong position to gain employment in the film and media industry.
Key Problems

The Demand for Higher Technical and Vocational Education

Higher technical and vocational education in England is small in comparison to other countries. A recent OECD report states that while many structures in England are not unusual, the size of the post-secondary vocational education and training sector is small by international standards, at under 10% of the cohort, compared to other OECD countries.

The UK currently has over one million people working in the science, engineering and technology sectors. While this accounts for 3.7% of the workforce, it still compares unfavourably to the European average of 5.3%.

Skills shortages are challenging for businesses in certain sectors, particularly manufacturers, caring, leisure, machine operative staff and other services. In addition there have been notable increases in the difficulties recruiting skilled and associate professionals. These findings from UKCES suggest the labour market is facing growing challenges in meeting employer demand.

There is also a need for HE institutions to do more to support students preparation for employment. CBI research found that businesses want these institutions to help students develop work and business relevant skills as part of undergraduate courses. Their research also found that 50% of all employers preferred graduates with degrees in science, technology, engineering or maths (STEM) subjects.

While England’s HE system is currently built around the expensive three-year residential degree, this may not be the most appropriate mode of study for many potential students. A report by the Institute for Employment Studies found 30% of the working adults they surveyed would consider applying to university at some point in the future. However, they want flexibility to study vocational subjects in their locality in the evenings, at weekends or part-time.
Leeds College of Building

Leeds College of Building were the key national player in the design and development of a new higher apprenticeship for the construction industry in the sustainable built environment.

This is a unique professional and technical programme involving aspects of designing, creating and conserving the built environment, key knowledge and skills for the construction industry.

The college has also developed a ‘Think Differently, Think Diversity’ campaign for the higher apprenticeship framework to support the business case for diversity and inclusion in construction and the built environment. This promotes the benefits of a diverse workforce which is inclusive of female, black, Asian and minority ethnic apprentices.

South Devon College

In 2005, South Devon College joined forces with the local NHS Trust and the University of Plymouth to meet the demands of the health sector. The college worked with the trust to create a Foundation Degree in Healthcare Practice, which was a new way of training staff to fill a gap in health and social care provision.

The strong joint delivery model, has led to increased collaboration that includes apprenticeship programmes and a studio school dedicated to health, social care and early years pathways.

New College Durham

New College Durham is the first in the north east region to develop a HE programme specifically for the needs of the voluntary sector. The Foundation Degree in Leadership in Voluntary and Community Organisations provides people with a progression route, recognition for the work they are doing, and a mechanism to develop higher level skills in a co-ordinated way.

The programme, developed in partnership with a local community training organisation, was designed to meet the specific needs of the sector, and has created an important opportunity for voluntary sector employees.
Supply

The relationship between the demand and supply of HE is complicated because much of the supply is controlled by universities and demand is filtered through variable careers advice services and the heritage of some institutions.

The relative ease of transition from academic A Levels to a degree, and a funding system that incentivises institutions to develop three or four-year full-time honours degree programmes has led to a growth in this type of provision, at the expense of less costly and potentially more appropriate vocational alternatives. A 2010 Universities UK research report highlights this:

“There were no incentives for pre-1992 universities to change their perspective on part-time teaching. They preferred to expand the more lucrative full-time postgraduate and international student markets and regarded the part-time undergraduate market as riskier, less profitable, and more expensive to enter and to deliver.”

While flexible, part-time HE courses are available at most FE colleges, the provision is unevenly supplied in most universities. There has been a nearly 50% decline in university based part-time HE over the last five years. This is considerably more than the estimated 20% decline in colleges.

Professional certificate and diploma students receive less generous government subsidies, if any, and only 15% of advanced apprenticeships progress to HE, the majority go on to college HE. Higher apprenticeship frameworks, which colleges are already actively involved in are welcome but need a simplified funding system and better promotion.

Overall, there is a need for future governments to apply themselves to the development of a flexible and high quality higher technical and vocational education system.
What could be done?

AoC believes more could be done to support higher technical and vocational education. We therefore make the following suggestions which merit further consideration by policy makers:

1. **Reform financial support for full-time and part-time HE to encourage more people to study part-time.** There are different financial support systems for those studying full-time compared to part-time. Though not a straightforward task, the Government needs to reassess the balance of incentives and payments in the loan system.

2. **Consider new names for higher technical and vocational qualifications such as professional or technical degrees.** Potential students are often confused about the difference between a foundation degree, higher national diploma or certificate in HE.

3. **Streamline financial support and funding for those working towards a higher apprenticeship.** At present those studying for a higher apprenticeship may need to access two different loans or receive no financial support. A national accrediting body may be needed for employer-endorsed higher apprenticeships.

4. **Endorse colleges and universities that develop local vocational progression routes.** The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) should support institutions working in partnership that have already maintained successful progression routes.

5. **Create a technical accreditation council to accredit colleges and others who want to award higher technical and vocational qualifications.** Colleges presently have to choose from 140 universities to offer HE. This is time-consuming and expensive. For vocational awards at levels 4 and 5, it would be more efficient to accredit colleges which are already high performing at this level to award their own qualifications in areas in which they have expertise.

6. **Support those colleges that want to achieve teaching or foundation degree awarding powers.** It has taken several colleges over four years to achieve these powers. This is too long. The process needs to be transparent and shorter.

7. **Allow colleges with foundation degree awarding powers to award them at other institutions.** It would make sense to give these colleges the legal power for their qualifications to be taught at other institutions and to work in consortia. This is the case for universities and the internal and external quality assurance systems are virtually the same.

8. **HEFCE should be able to provide funding for innovative HE capital projects in FE colleges, just as it can for universities.** Colleges are part of the HE sector and therefore should be able to access the same resource on an equal footing.
The development of a HNC in General Engineering is an example of the constructive way in which East Kent College is seeking to address local concerns that too many residents lack the right skills to respond to anticipated labour market changes, and the sub-region has a low participation rate into HE.

A new Centre for Environmental Technologies has been developed at the Broadstairs campus, which offers a range of courses, in subjects such as renewable energy generation, plumbing and heating.

The programme offers an intentionally broad base of study across engineering science, project design, electrical power, logic controllers and mechatronics that allow students to have access to a range of progression routes in an area of high unemployment.
The Evidence Base


