

# Thinking with Bourdieu : thinking after Bourdieu. Using 'field' to consider in/equalities in the changing field of English higher education

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## Thinking with Bourdieu: thinking after Bourdieu. Using ‘field’ to consider in/equalities in the changing field of English higher education

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This paper uses Bourdieu’s concept of ‘field’ as a tool to examine higher education participation in England in the context of diversified and differentiated provision. Admissions practices for courses in two institutions offering tertiary and higher education demonstrate how the official rules of the game shape the experience of students moving into and through HE on vocational and alternative routes. These examples suggest that rules created for the ‘selective’ part of the HE field can have perverse effects on other parts of the field, creating barriers rather than bridges for students seeking to participate in HE via alternative routes. The paper concludes by considering the strengths and limitations of using Bourdieu’s tools for understanding diversification in HE. Does using Bourdieu lead to the inevitable conclusion that diversity is a form of diversion, directing a proportion of the population through an easily accessible, but ultimately less rewarding path, or can Bourdieu’s tools suggest possibilities for transformation and change?

**Keywords:** Bourdieu; field; tertiary education; higher education; diversity

### Introduction

This paper explores the use of ‘field’ as a conceptual tool to examine the changing field of higher education (HE) as a result of expansion and diversification. These changes are associated with policy drives towards ‘universal’ higher education (Trow, 1973, 2006), a process that has been referred to in the United States under President Obama’s administration as ‘College for All’. The specific example considered in the paper is the position of English further education (FE) colleges in relation to the HE field. FE colleges in England offer academic, vocational and general education, and are similar (though not identical) to community colleges in the United States, and technical and further education (TAFE) institutes in Australia.

A considerable number of students in FE colleges do not follow a traditional ‘smooth’ trajectory into higher education (Furlong, Cartmel, Biggart, Sweeting, & West, 2003). They are not students who take academic (A-level) examinations at the end of full-time secondary education, apply to university to take an undergraduate degree, and move on to university either straight away or following what is known as a ‘gap year’. They are instead a diversity of students who may be following vocational routes to HE at level 3 in the English education system (equivalent to ISCED

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level 3),<sup>1</sup> or alternative ‘access’ routes to HE. They may be working-class students who are the first in their family to participate in HE, and they may be mature students (defined as over 21 in policy contexts such as England and Australia). Some of them actively want to progress to HE; some see HE as outside their horizons for action (Bloomer & Hodgkinson, 2000; Reay, David, & Ball, 2005). Over the past 30 to 40 years HE provision has become increasingly diverse to accommodate such students.

This paper considers how Bourdieu’s concept of ‘field’ may help to understand and analyse these changing practices in English higher education. A number of researchers have argued in favour of a broad field of tertiary education or lifelong learning, incorporating HE and other forms of post-school education and training (Duke, 2005; Garrod & Macfarlane, 2007), while HE policy under New Labour (1997–2010) appeared to promote a single but diversified ‘field’ of HE. Using Bourdieu’s work provides a means of examining the strengths and limitations of these moves to create a single field of tertiary education.

This discussion needs to be set against the contingent and historical location of the practices discussed in the paper. The study from which the data are drawn took place between 2006 and 2008, during a period of higher education expansion in England. This was part of a global drive to increase levels of education associated with economic competitiveness and so-called knowledge economies (Becker, 2006; Brown & Lauder, 2006). The New Labour government (1997–2010) had set a target in its election manifesto of 50% participation by 2010 in some form of HE amongst those aged 18–30. Diversity of routes into HE and of HE provision were expected to help achieve this target (Parry, 2005).

Increasing opportunities and seeking to achieve greater equity in the 2000s context of expansion was very different from the post-2008 context of economic crisis across Europe and other post-industrialised countries. A ‘global war for talent’ amongst a highly educated elite (Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2010; Brown & Tannock, 2009) contrasts with long-term austerity measures, wage freezes and unemployment for many people. While the former involves struggles on an international scale over the most prestigious forms of higher education, austerity measures in national economies suggest that pursuing HE in parts of the field that are lower down the hierarchy of prestige is an increasingly risky and uncertain choice.

In brief, the first section of this paper sets out the English context by exploring the tensions between ‘promoting outstanding talent’ versus ‘College for All’ in the current political and policy context. The second section outlines Bourdieu’s concept of field and goes on to consider how various researchers have sought to think with and beyond Bourdieu. The paper then provides a brief analysis of the HE admissions process in England, using Bourdieu’s tools to highlight the effects of the shifting constitution of the HE field on gaining access to HE. The paper concludes by discussing what work ‘field’ can do to help understand and think critically about taken-for-granted practices under conditions of change.

### **Promoting outstanding talent or College for All?**

There are significant tensions in discourses concerning social mobility in the UK in the 2010s, which are relevant to widening participation and diversification in English higher education. Social mobility is professed as a crucial concern of the UK Coalition government elected in 2010, with an all-party parliamentary group (APPG)

on social mobility formed in 2011 to address the issue, and a Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission established in 2012<sup>2</sup>, which has a remit to monitor the progress of government and others on child poverty and social mobility. A presentation published by the APPG in May 2012 lists seven key ‘truths’ about social mobility and the role of education (APPG on Social Mobility, 2012). ‘University’ is identified as ‘the top determinant of later opportunities’, which, the report states, ‘raises questions about university admissions’ (APPG, 2012, p. 10).

But the emphasis is not on ‘College for All’ – a system that involves provision of universal HE as defined by Trow (1973, 2006). It falls instead on nurturing outstanding talent, identifying the potential ‘stars to shine’ (APPG: 9), and making sure that whatever their social background, these potential stars are able to gain places at top universities, such as those in the UK’s Russell Group (see Milburn, 2012, 2013). This group of universities positions their members as preparing the stars of the future, claiming that students will have the opportunity to ‘interact with leading thinkers and academics at the forefront of their disciplines ... have access to first class libraries and facilities and a curriculum informed by world class research’ and to study ‘alongside motivated and talented peers’ with access to ‘internships in coveted professions’.<sup>3</sup>

For students who are not defined by the APPG as future shining stars, there should be access to ‘worthwhile qualifications’ (APPG, 2012, p. 9) alongside learning personal resilience and emotional wellbeing skills (ibid: p.10). For according to the presentation, there are three types of social mobility for three types of people, which involve:

Breaking out from poverty of aspiration or a troubled background.

Moving on up – making sure all can reach their potential.

Stars to shine – nurturing outstanding talent. (APPG, 2012, p. 9)

The danger in this formulation is that it is reminiscent of the tripartite system proposed after the Second World War in England for secondary and post-school education, based on the notion of different forms of education for three different types of mind (Committee of the Secondary School Examinations Council, 1943; Ministry of Education, 1959). As Gleeson (2000) has argued, this can lock individuals into particular trajectories that ultimately perpetuate rather than overcome inequalities.

In relation to HE, there has been a growing trend since the Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition Government came to power in the UK in 2010 to focus on university higher education, particularly at ‘top’ universities. New Labour promoted the expansion and diversification of HE on the grounds of economic competitiveness and social inclusion, with a growing role for English further education colleges in the provision of HE. In contrast, the Coalition Government has emphasised the importance of access to top universities, with FE colleges a location for lower cost provision<sup>4</sup> This provision, following the APPG above, is clearly differentiated in the eyes of government policymakers from that offered by universities.

Yet, as a comprehensive research report published by the UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) in 2012 explains (Parry, Callender, Scott, & Temple, 2012), there is considerable confusion amongst HE applicants about HE in English FE colleges. The evidence gathered for the report found that 17% of students studying for a Bachelor’s degree in an FE college thought they had applied to study at a university rather than a college.

### The value of theory in considering why this matters

Why does this matter? If the students who found themselves in a tertiary college rather than a university were happy and satisfied, does it matter that they had not realised where they were studying? Since they were presumably not ‘stars to shine’ whose ‘outstanding talent’ needed to be nurtured, were they not simply taking ‘worthwhile qualifications’ for their perceived level of need (APPG, 2012)?

There is a growing hegemonic discourse in England that clear divisions between those with outstanding talent and the rest of the population are how things should be. There is also a growing ‘common sense’ perception that numbers participating in HE are too high, and that (higher) education for all is not a good idea. This perception is fuelled by the views of influential employer organisations, such as the UK’s Confederation of British Industry (CBI, 2009), which argues that at a time of financial pressure, ‘College for All’ targets for 50% of 18- to 30-year-olds to participate in HE by 2010 ‘should be dropped for the time being’ (CBI, 2009, p. 6), by negative media coverage of new and non-traditional degree subjects (*Daily Mail*, 2011; *London Evening Standard*, 2007; *Telegraph*, 2007, 2010), and by media commentaries that compare degrees unfavourably with apprenticeships (*Telegraph*, 2013). These views present challenges to my own understandings of the changing field of higher education, where there are difficult questions concerning how diversity may on the one hand be about the democratisation of HE, but on the other may be about the diversion of certain students in order to preserve elite, prestigious forms of HE for a select minority.

So how can theory help to think through these issues in a productive way and, in particular, how can Bourdieu’s conceptual tools help? Bourdieu emphasised that theory is a means of understanding and challenging practice. In the field of education, Bourdieu used his theory of practice to analyse and question the role of education in the reproduction of inequality in France (Bourdieu, 1996a; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Subsequently, researchers in numerous countries have used Bourdieu’s conceptual tools to understand and theorise changing policies and practices in education, including tertiary and higher education.

The notion of habitus in particular has attracted considerable attention in recent years (see for example Colley, 2003; Lahire, 2003; McNay, 1999; Reay, 1998, 2004). This interest in habitus connects to changing understandings of education and career trajectories. The breakdown of standard, predictable life trajectories and notions of individual choice and responsibility have resulted in a focus on the construction of identities. Theories of individualisation have proposed that individuals are, on the one hand, able but, on the other hand, are also forced to construct their own biographies (Beck, 1992; Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994; Giddens, 1991). Bourdieu’s concept of habitus has provided a means of counteracting the view that everything is possible and that individuals have complete freedom to choose futures of their own making. While this means that some critics have argued that Bourdieu’s work offers a too deterministic view of social reproduction (for example Jenkins, 2002), others have used his concepts to counteract an overly agentic understanding of social practice (Colley, James, Tedder, & Diment, 2003; McLeod, 2005b; Weininger & Lareau, 2003).

However, my focus in this paper is on Bourdieu’s concept of field and how field (along with the associated concepts of habitus and capital) can be used to examine



taken-for-granted practices in the field of higher education, and to shed light on struggles surrounding changes in the field.

### *Two caveats*

First, the aim of the paper is not to defend the work of Bourdieu, nor to advocate that Bourdieu's theory is the only useful way of theorising current changes. As Richard Jenkins (2002, p. 11) puts it, Bourdieu's concepts are 'good to think with' but work *after* Bourdieu, which has sought to develop and adapt his thinking tools, shows the value of building on and beyond his work (see for example Adkins & Skeggs, 2004; McLeod, 2005a, 2005b; Warde, 2004).

Second, the paper focuses on the concept of field. However, field is closely entwined with the concepts of habitus and capital in Bourdieu's work, and Bourdieu would argue that these concepts cannot be considered or used separately (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Whilst acknowledging this, I follow other researchers in taking the opportunity to focus on field specifically, because it provides an opportunity to raise questions about the complexities and challenges resulting from changes occurring in the context of a particular field (see for example Grenfell & James, 2004; Lingard, Rawolle, & Taylor, 2005).

### **Using Bourdieu's concept of field to analyse HE practices**

Bourdieu used field, and the allied concepts of habitus and capital, to understand social practice, and particularly to uncover the workings of power and inequality in particular social spaces. However, as various analyses of his work have shown (Grenfell & James, 1998; Harker, Mahar, & Wilkes, 1990; Martin, 2003; Warde, 2004), Bourdieu refined and adapted his theoretical tools over time, in order to understand changing social conditions. His research on higher education in France emphasised the autonomy of the HE field (Bourdieu, 1996a; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, 1990), but his later work involved consideration of the power struggles involved as a result of the growing heteronomy of different fields (for example Bourdieu, 1993, 1996b). Critical accounts of Bourdieu's work suggest that his tools can be further refined and adapted to help develop understandings of current conditions (Mills, 2008; Naidoo, 2004).

Bourdieu is not the only researcher to work with the concept of 'field'. Martin's (2003) review of field theory traces its origins to the physical sciences, with classical electromagnetism as 'the best model of intellectually rigorous field theory' (ibid., 3). Martin delineates three senses of the concept of field: a topological space of positions, a field of relational forces, and a battlefield of contestation, all of which can be found in Bourdieu's use of the concept (see Wacquant, 2007).

In Bourdieu's work, field, along with the concepts of habitus and capital, is used to make sense of the differentiated nature of social space in advanced societies, and practical action within it (Bourdieu, 1985, 1998). For Bourdieu, a field is a particular social space that involves a network or configuration of relations between positions. He explains this as follows:

... the social world can be represented as a space (with several dimensions) constructed on the basis of principles of differentiation or distribution constituted by the set of properties active within the social universe in question, i.e., capable of conferring



strength, power within that universe, on their holder. Agents and groups of agents are thus defined by their relative positions within that space. (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 724)

What positions agents or institutions within a field is the possession of capital and power that is relevant to the purposes of a particular field. Positions in the field then produce in agents and institutions particular ways of thinking, being and doing. The relations between positions in the field are particularly significant in analysing the field for Bourdieu. However, he also emphasises the importance of the position of a particular field in relation to others, such as the field of higher education and its position in relation to the field of employment or to the wider field of power (see Bourdieu, 1996a; Grenfell & James, 2004; Thomson, 2005).

A critical property of a field is the degree of autonomy it enjoys (Bourdieu, 1993), that is, 'the capacity it has gained, in the course of its development, to insulate itself from external influences and to uphold its own criteria of evaluation over and against those of neighbouring or intruding fields (scientific originality versus commercial profit or political rectitude, for instance)' (Wacquant, 2007, p. 269). Fields vary in their level of autonomy, and in how much they depend on agents from other fields to define them. Whereas Bourdieu's work on HE in France in the 1960s and '70s proposed that the academic field enjoyed a high degree of autonomy, subsequent researchers have focused on the impact of increasing heteronomy on the HE field (Deer, 2003; Maton, 2005), which is considered further below.

Field for Bourdieu is a field of contestation, involving struggle or tension (Martin, 2003; Wacquant, 2007), and 'market' and 'game' are often used as analogies or metaphors by Bourdieu and by researchers drawing on his work to explain the workings of field. The notion of the market emphasises the centrality of capital exchanges. Individual customers have different purchasing power, different forms of capital (social, cultural and economic) that they may use. There is inequality but also mutual dependency (Hodkinson, Biesta, & James, 2007). The metaphor of game suggests that the field is governed by rules, and that people are contestants, in competition for the maintenance or increase of capital. Game is also used to indicate strategy (how to play the game in order to win) and to indicate 'unofficial' rules. Participation in the game implies a commitment to the value of the activities and the capital of the field, that is, a belief that the investment is worthwhile (Hodkinson, Biesta, & James, 2007; Warde, 2004). The analogy of the game emphasises the dynamic nature of field. Field does not just represent the terrain on which the game is played, in the form of a given set of structural conditions. Rather, the field is a social space that involves negotiation between participants in processes of positioning both the self and others, and being positioned by them. While such negotiations follow the logic of the field, this does not mean that the process is strictly rational. Rather, positioning is based on judgements of 'the impossible, the possible, and the probable' (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 78).

Like a game, a field has rules for how to play, stakes or forms of value (i.e. capital), and strategies for playing the game (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Struggles occur not just within the rules, but over defining the rules themselves (Bourdieu, 1991; Martin, 2003, p. 31). In other words, if social life is a game, it is not one with unchanging rules (Sallaz & Zavisca, 2007, p. 33). Fields are also therefore 'historical constellations that arise, grow, change shape, and sometimes wane or perish, over time' (Wacquant, 2007, p. 268).

## Working with and beyond Bourdieu's concept of field

Wacquant (1992) proposes that:

... an invitation to think with Bourdieu is of necessity an invitation to think beyond Bourdieu, and against him whenever required. (Wacquant, 1992, p. xiv)

In this section I consider how a number of researchers have taken up this invitation, focusing on the concept of field. In Bourdieu's work social space is understood as involving multiple coexisting fields of practice, but this conceptualisation of social space raises questions regarding the relations among fields (Burawoy, 2012), including the autonomy or heteronomy of a field with respect to other fields; boundaries and movement between fields; and positioning and position-taking in the field.

A key concern for researchers who have used Bourdieu's tools to understand higher education at a time of rapid and significant change is how change is associated with increasing heteronomy, that is, with increasing control of the field from forces outside the field (see for example Deer, 2003; Maton, 2005; Naidoo, 2004; Thomson, 2005). Whereas autonomy was a hallmark of the elite field of HE in Bourdieu's work in the 1960s and '70s, allowing dominant classes to reproduce their social position by exploiting cultural as well as economic capital, work by subsequent researchers has focused on power struggles related to increasing heteronomy in the HE field.

As Naidoo (2004) and Maton's (2005) research indicate, heteronomy is closely associated with the expansion and diversification of HE. Naidoo's research suggests that this can lead to autonomous and heteronomous sectors coexisting within a field. Her analysis of the changing field of higher education in South Africa between 1985 and 1990, at a time when the apartheid regime of the Afrikaner Nationalist government was coming to an end, found that institutions developed divergent strategies to address the demand for access to HE, associated with the degree of state control to which they were subject. Maton's analysis of the expansion of HE in England suggests that 'new' students in English HE in the 1960s and the 2000s, the 'products of state interventions in education', have been viewed as the embodiment of heteronomy, introducing 'pragmatic, utilitarian and careerist' orientations to HE study (Maton, 2005, pp. 693–694). These authors suggest that struggles over autonomy and heteronomy may differ across different parts of the field, and heteronomy may be associated with benefits for 'new' students to HE.

One consequence of increasing heteronomy is that the boundaries between fields may become more permeable. Marginson (2008) argues that Bourdieu's conceptualisation of field 'requires boundedness, predictability and a certain insularity', and therefore does not adequately reflect the increasingly 'flaky borders' of social spaces. He argues that fields are 'more or less bounded and predictable' social spaces, but they are no longer closed (ibid., 313). Writing about the globalisation of higher education, he turns to Appadurai's (1996) notion of 'scapes' as a useful means of thinking beyond Bourdieu, in order to conceptualise global cultural flows: 'Global flows are structured, but their structures are uneven, overlapping, disjunctive, asynchronous, temporary and contingent' (Appadurai, 1996, cited in Marginson, 2008, p. 313).

Drawing on Appadurai, Marginson sees opportunities in a global field of HE that is provisional and in continuous transformation, which allow for hybrid academic forms to be created in the gaps left by those in positions of power. Marginson does

not pursue this idea in detail but his suggestion presents a number of possibilities in relation to the focus of this paper. Hybrid forms might involve increasingly ‘flaky’ or porous boundaries between different fields (such as the fields of further education and higher education in England), or the creation of a hybrid sub-field of HE, or indeed the construction of a new field of ‘lifelong learning’ as envisaged by researchers in a number of countries (see for example Doughney, 2000; Gallacher, 2006; Garrod & Macfarlane, 2007; Keating, 2006). These writers promote the idea of a seamless system of lifelong learning, which would overcome the boundaries between different sectors in post-secondary education. However, hybridity may not change overall relations of power and Marginson notes that while new spaces may be created, the scope for effective strategy may remain concentrated in the ‘high academic subfield’ (2008, p. 314).

### Movement between fields

A third question concerning the relations among fields turns attention to the movement of individual agents, both *from* one field *to* another, and back and forth between fields. Burawoy (2012, p. 38) emphasises how Bourdieu’s field theory forces us to ask how individuals nurtured in one field behave when they move from that field into another, while McLeod (2005b), in an analysis of feminist engagements with Bourdieu, considers the effects of moving *back and forth* across different social fields. She comments that contradictions and instability may arise from moving between different fields, though she is dubious that these may create opportunities to achieve disruption and change, as claimed by feminists such as McNay (1999, 2000).

What both forms of movement between fields do is to open up questions of the differential positioning of agents in one field compared with another and how such differences may affect individuals’ capacity to act in a particular field.

The fourth issue raised by a number of researchers concerns positioning and position-taking in a given field. Bourdieu is regularly criticised for an ‘oversocialized’ concept of the individual who appears to be ‘a mere bearer of social positions, one who comes to love and want his/her fate’ (Lovell, 2000, p. 15). Feminist analysis in particular challenges Bourdieu on this, pointing out that girls and women ‘do not slip easily into the feminine position marked out for them by their sex’ (Lovell, 2000, p. 17). Nevertheless, Lovell also argues that Bourdieu’s attention to the social conditions surrounding practice can counteract an overemphasis on a ‘politics of the performative’ to be found in the work of postmodern feminists such as Butler (1990, 1997), and proposes that a positive engagement between Bourdieu and feminist theory is mutually profitable.

Allard (2005) provides an example of seeking to work productively in this way. She uses Bourdieu’s concept of field to examine the positioning of economically disadvantaged young women in Australia in the different social fields of family, friends, school and community. For Allard, Bourdieu’s concept of field allows an analysis of the scope for individuals to deploy particular kinds of capital, how relations of power operate differently in different social fields, and how different forms of capital are therefore valued or devalued within the ‘game’ in a particular social field (ibid., 69). She argues that Bourdieu’s fields of action prevent an overly agentic analysis of individuals’ opportunities to achieve change, but, at the same time, they

provide a means of exploring how the young women in her study may be able to exert greater or lesser degrees of agency and autonomy in different fields of action.

What the above considerations of the relations among fields point towards, but do not consider in any detail, is the significance of deciding what constitutes the 'field' itself, and the implications of including or excluding particular institutions or agents in the conceptualisation of a particular field. Here, Warde (2004) makes an important critical observation about Bourdieu's work, commenting that: 'It is not totally transparent how one identifies the activity which provides the content, or *raison d'être*, for the existence of a field' (2004, p. 14). Warde's question relates to the use of field as an analytical tool. But this question is also bound up with the way 'field' is used on the ground to define and redefine the boundaries of practice.

In relation to HE provision in further education, which is the focus of this paper, the question of what constitutes the field in practice and in analytical terms is very pertinent. In England, the role of further education colleges in the provision of HE raises questions about how these institutions relate to the HE field. Are they part of the field? Do they form a different field? Are they a subfield or part of an overlapping field? Do they represent a 'hybrid' space created by porous borders between fields? And does this make any difference to their practices, to ways of playing the game? What are the implications for students, particularly those who are potential first-generation participants in HE? For if positions in a field where a particular set of capitals are valued produce in agents and institutions particular ways of thinking, being and doing (Thomson, 2005), then being positioned in a different field might challenge and conflict with those ways of thinking, being and doing. Buroway's (2012) question might be applied here, to ask: how do students 'nurtured' in the vocational FE field behave when they move into the differently structured field of higher education? A further issue is the capacity of individuals to understand and negotiate their way through a social field where change is endemic. Gaining access to HE may be challenging for students where participation in HE is not the norm, but, as the example of students from Parry, Callender, Scott, and Temple's (2012) report cited earlier suggests, understanding a changing field of HE is even more difficult.

In order to consider how the shifting constitution of the HE field has significant implications for practice, including agents' positioning in the field, in the next section I use two examples of admissions to HE in England to explore the ways in which the definition of what counts as the HE field can have implications for admissions practice, and to draw attention to the confusion that can result in a period of change.

### Negotiating the admissions process in a changing field of higher education

For many years, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) has been central to the HE admissions process in England. UCAS is an established part of the HE field, acting as a gatekeeper to entry into the field. It is funded through institutional membership and, until recently, members have consisted of universities and higher education colleges.<sup>5</sup> The admissions process on which UCAS is based was introduced in 1961<sup>6</sup> and it was not until 2010 that the first major review of the service took place (UCAS, 2011, 2012). Nevertheless, the growing impact of the expansion and massification of HE has resulted in a number of recent changes to the system, such as the recognition of an increasing range of different qualifications in

the UCAS tariff system, which allocates points to qualifications for entry to HE, and the inclusion of the two-year Foundation degree on the UCAS website, though the system still does not include applications for part-time study.

Despite these changes, the logic of practice (Bourdieu, 1990) on which UCAS is based embodies the traditional norms and rules of the HE field. The application system is permeated by discourses of choice – helping students to ‘make informed choices about higher education’.<sup>7</sup> With regard to social mobility, the process is geared towards seeking out ‘stars to shine’, attempting to address the concern that ‘applicants with real potential are not making it through to our most selective institutions’ (BIS, 2011a, p. 6; see also Browne, 2010, p. 32; UCAS, 2011). As a result, a key purpose of the admissions infrastructure is to work as a sorting mechanism, supporting a taken-for-granted hierarchical stratification of the HE field.

In effect, the UCAS infrastructure has been aimed mainly at young people looking to study for a Bachelor’s degree full time at university, and centres on competitive selection for courses. The application includes a record of the applicant’s qualifications, a personal statement and an academic reference, with applicants permitted to select up to five institutions to which they wish to apply. Courses and institutions do not necessarily interview prospective students, so the written application is very important. It acts as a check on the existing academic capital of potential students (Naidoo, 2004) and plays a significant role in controlling who gains access to particular higher education courses and institutions.

The need to make a committed investment to this process is apparent in the training events for teachers on how to make successful applications, and the plethora of private companies who advertise their services in writing and editing personal statements for applicants.<sup>8</sup> However, these practices appear more important for ‘selecting’ institutions and courses where there is competition for places. The need to invest so heavily in the application process for entry to other parts of the HE field – such as ‘recruiting’ institutions and courses where all applicants with the required grades are normally offered a place,<sup>9</sup> or for local provision in an FE college – is more questionable.

Despite the ubiquity of UCAS as *the* taken-for-granted process for gaining access to HE, until recently study at HE level in further education colleges did not require students to apply through the UCAS system. They could apply directly to a college and the application procedure was not based on the selective and competitive procedures that form part of the UCAS system. In effect, the admissions practices were those of the FE field, not those of the HE field. However, during the 2000s, as part of the New Labour Government’s widening participation policies, the provision of HE in FE became much more closely tied to the HE field. This included the introduction of foundation degrees as the preferred qualification for two-year sub-degree-level qualifications – intended to replace established Higher National Certificate and Diploma (HNC and HND) qualifications – the use of HE funding and inspection arrangements for HE in FE provision, and the possibility of gaining degree-awarding powers for FE colleges. These could all be seen as signs of HE provision in FE colleges becoming part of the HE field – although wider provision of education and training in FE colleges remained in a different, further education field.

How did this affect admissions practices? As part of the FurtherHigher research project, which took place at the time of these changes to HE, the data gathered included application and admissions practices. The FurtherHigher project was a two-year study of widening participation in English higher education.<sup>10</sup> The study used



both qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate the changing shape and experience of HE in England. The fieldwork included interviews with 82 students, 35 course tutors and 11 senior managers in four case study 'dual sector' FE/HE institutions, alongside documentary analysis, and the collection of fieldwork observation records.<sup>11</sup> Experiences in two course sites in this study provide an insight into the effect of constructing HE in FE as part of the HE rather than part of the FE field, showing how tutors and students were faced with very different practices from the taken-for-granted ways of being and doing that they were used to.

Progression to HE from an occupational National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) is still unusual in England. Although not readily accepted for entry to university (see Fuller & Unwin, 2012; Joslin & Smith, 2013), students at Citygate College<sup>12</sup>, one of the four institutions in the FurtherHigher study, who completed an NVQ level 3 in a culinary area were entitled to progress within the college onto its own degree course. Between 20 and 30 students were recruited each year in this way and Vivienne, the programme coordinator, explained 'it's now become part of, almost the culture, that there is this opportunity to move on if you feel it's appropriate'.

However, according to tutors, decisions to continue to HE were not made by students until late in the final term of their NVQ programme, nearly six months after the official deadline for UCAS applications. The college therefore negotiated the field on the students' behalf, bypassed the UCAS regulations, and put in late entries for them. For students on the NVQ, the UCAS deadline for applications, which required students to decide nearly a year in advance that they wished to progress to higher education, was too early. Bypassing the official deadline allowed for much later decision-making by these students who were less certain of their next step, but this was dependent on a predefined progression route, in this case internal to the institution.

A second example in the FurtherHigher project involved students on Foundation degrees. The introduction of a two-year Foundation degree in England in 2001, with a stated opportunity for progression to the final year of a Bachelor's degree, created a new transition point in undergraduate programmes. In two HE sites in the project, which had a long tradition of offering two-year programmes that were precursors to Foundation degrees (the Higher National Diploma), students and tutors were aware of the varying and unregulated arrangements for application to progress to full Bachelor's degree study. However, in an FE college offering Foundation degrees, there was much more confusion. Following conflicting advice at the college, some students on the Early Years foundation degree submitted UCAS applications to progress to the Bachelor year, while others did not. As two of the students found out, trying to play by the rules did not pay off:

We were just having this random conversation, and into the conversation popped the fact that we actually had to apply to UCAS all over again for the third year, which we'd not been led to believe. So we were all like, 'oh my God, what are we going to do?' So I went home and I went on the internet and like went on to the UCAS site and everything. Well for a start, the applying date had already gone, so I wasn't very happy about that. I applied and thought 'Right, OK'. And when we came in the next week, we were then told, 'actually no you don't have to apply through UCAS', and I said 'but I already have now because you told me to'. And that was like 'well I think you've done that wrong'. So well what shall I do? So it was like another 2 weeks before I was told whether I'd done this right or not. To us that's a big thing, because you don't know where you are. (Rosie, Early Years Foundation degree, East Heath College)

Whilst this could be put down to an administrative error by the college, it is also a reflection of the alien nature of following UCAS procedures in this context and indicates once again the confrontation between taken-for-granted practices and rules of the game in the FE and the HE fields.

These two examples provide a small indication of what it can mean to become part of one field rather than another or to be positioned in the flaky borderlands between two fields. Once part of the HE field, the rules of the admissions game are largely defined by those with most power in the field. This means that gaining access to selective and elite parts of the HE field requires considerable resources in order to play the UCAS admissions game successfully. In addition, there is a perverse effect on other parts of the field where the official rules of the game can create barriers rather than bridges for students following alternative routes into and through HE. Formerly, when HE in FE was not clearly positioned within the HE field, practices typical of the *further* education field enabled different admissions processes to be used, which better matched the needs of students for whom HE study was not a taken-for-granted, long-term goal. Thus in some cases students following ‘non-traditional’ educational routes into and through HE in England may be positioned and be able to take up positions that allow them greater power in a field defined as *further* education, than in a field defined as *higher* education.

Of course, it is possible to revise and adapt admissions processes. Since the research in this paper was completed, there have been changes to the English UCAS system to better accommodate HE provision in FE colleges. However, the application and admissions process also acts as one of the means of positioning in the field of HE. So while changes to central application processes may help to make them easier to follow, they will not resolve the ways in which the admissions process is used to position institutions and students within a hierarchically stratified HE system. Incorporating HE in FE into the HE field thus creates as well as resolves problems for ‘diverse’ students, for the HE field has a different logic of practice from the FE field and this may prevent FE institutions from legitimately maintaining practices that were deemed to benefit a diverse student population. Moreover, the experiences described here indicate how changes to the field make access and participation even more complex to negotiate for ‘widening participation’ students.

### Using ‘field’ to consider in/equalities in the changing field of English higher education

What work can Bourdieu’s concept of ‘field’ do to help understand and think critically about such taken-for-granted practices under conditions of change?

In the examples in this paper, the concept of field helps to show that the admissions process not only acts to control who gains access to different parts of the HE field but can also be seen as a site of contestation in a changing and more diverse field. The taken-for-granted rules of the admissions game, created by the more autonomous high academic subfield (Marginson, 2008), face challenges when they come up against an alternative set of taken-for-granted practices imported from the FE field, with rules that operate differently, that are influenced by concerns external to the HE field. However, while the HE field may accommodate these alternative practices, this only occurs where accommodation does not threaten the autonomy of those in more powerful positions within the field, where the field is structured by ‘(higher status) autonomous and (lower status) heteronomous



principles of hierarchization' (Maton, 2005, p. 694). In effect, HE in FE practices may be tolerated as long as they only apply to institutions in a lower status sub-field of the overall HE field.

The above argument positions HE in FE as a sub-field of the overall field of HE. Positioning HE in FE in this way could be seen as redefining the boundaries between the fields of HE and FE, in line with Marginson's (2008) suggestion that the boundaries between fields are becoming more permeable than envisaged by Bourdieu. Marginson sees opportunities here for hybrid academic forms to develop, and there are certainly policy attempts in England that could be seen as encouraging a new field of 'higher vocational education' (BIS, 2011b, p. 13), with greater independence from the existing field of HE. However, as Bourdieu's work emphasises and Marginson also acknowledges, redefining the boundaries between fields, and/or creating a new hybrid field, does not automatically change overall relations of power.

A significant question as the fields of HE and FE shift and change in relation to one another is the movement of individual agents between fields (Burawoy, 2012; McLeod, 2005b). The examples of students' experience offered in this paper indicate how these students relied on cultures in the FE sector to care for their interests. The admissions process serves as a marker of their differential positioning in the HE field compared with the FE field, with any capital and agency they may have developed through their engagement in the FE field not carrying enough value to negotiate the HE field with confidence and ease. While students may not slip readily into the positions marked out for them in a field that is dominated by the high academic sub-field (Lovell, 2000), there are important questions to be considered regarding the possible mismatch between the ways of thinking, being and doing in the FE field, which do not prepare students to move smoothly between the FE and the HE fields.

The concept of field thus provides a means of focusing attention on the construction of power within and between fields. It helps to problematize the positioning of HE in FE in relation to the HE field, and to raise questions about the strengths and limitations of seeking to create one broad field of tertiary education. For whilst there may be some advantages, using the concept of field helps to show that it cannot simply be read off that the construction of one tertiary field will reduce inequalities, or contribute to social mobility.

This is particularly important at the present time. The prevalent *Zeitgeist* is one of identifying outstanding talent, not making sure that all can reach their potential. This makes Bourdieu's conceptualisation of field, which focuses on practices that are strategic and competitive, a useful tool for analysing the HE field under current conditions. At the same time, it is important to be aware that there is much conduct that does not have a competitive logic (Warde, 2004). For Warde, field identifies particular attributes or properties of activities, but does not account for all practice, and Naidoo (2004) makes a similar point in relation to the HE field specifically. Bourdieu's tools direct attention onto competitive strategy and an analysis of that aspect of practice. His tools are less useful for considering the value of the internal content of a field – the way that activities within a field may provide moral satisfaction, self-esteem, personal development and social interaction for example. These critiques serve as a useful reminder that using Bourdieu's tools encourages a particular way of examining the changing field of HE, which does not do justice to all of the practices that constitute participation in HE. Following this view, the use of

Bourdieu's tools could also be criticised for leading to the inevitable conclusion that diversity is a form of diversion, directing a proportion of the population through an easily accessible, but ultimately less rewarding path, so that it is necessary to move beyond Bourdieu to identify possibilities for transformation and change.

Recent work that explores the notion of hybridity and hybrid organisations offers one possibility for thinking beyond Bourdieu, and beyond a reading of vocational diversification in HE as diversion. Graf (2013) and Powell and Solga (2010) suggest that new hybrid HE institutions, which blend elements of vocational education and training (VET) and higher education, can become distinct organisational forms that are more than simply an amalgam of HE and VET, and therefore open up opportunities and provide the possibility of individual mobility. Fumasoli and Huisman's (2013) analysis of higher education institutional positioning complements this work, suggesting that institutions may have the strategic agency to locate themselves 'in a favourable niche' in a diverse HE system (*ibid.*, 158).

The opportunities presented by new hybrid organisations are not new, according to Kaiserfeld (2013). He traces the formation and reformation of hybrid academic organisations at times of changing historical moments in the uses of science back to the eighteenth century. He argues that as new hybrid organisations become established, they take on the ideals of traditional academic organisations with higher status and proposes that change is achieved not through the transformation of existing organisations, but the founding of new hybrid organisations.

Although none of these authors uses the concept of field, in Bourdieu's terms their work is a form of engagement with the changing nature and relations between HE and VET fields. Their work points to possibilities for agency and, as Fumasoli and Huisman (2013, p. 158) suggest, opportunities to 'shape beneficial relations with other actors in the higher education system', and potentially move towards democratisation rather than diversion through new and hybrid forms of HE.

However, I would also argue that the future provision of higher education still needs to involve thinking *with* as well as *beyond* Bourdieu. Field enables a critical consideration of apparently progressive changes to support and encourage students who follow vocational and alternative routes, which can however be misrecognised as transformative, when in practice their value may not transfer to other fields. Fraser's (1995, 2005) work can be helpful here. She discusses this dilemma by distinguishing between affirmative and transformative practices. Affirmative practices seek to 'correct inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them'. In contrast, transformative practices aim to restructure 'the underlying generative framework', that is, they aim to transform the underlying political-economic structure, and change the conditions of existence for everyone (Fraser, 1995, p. 82).

Such debates are particularly important at the present time, when in the UK, as well as in the USA and Australia, the value and relevance of 'college for all', that is, universal provision of higher education (Trow, 1973, 2006), where 50% and more of a given age cohort participate in HE, are now questioned. Shortly after the 2010 general election in the UK, the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills for the incoming Coalition government, made the following statement:

For many individuals and for the country there may be more to be gained from vocational education in FE – which is in many respects, the area where we will tackle some of our key deficits as a country in intermediate skills. Apprenticeships rather than

degree courses? ... The reality is that our best FE colleges and advanced apprenticeships are delivering vocational education every bit as valuable for their students and the wider economy as the programmes provided by universities.... [T]here could be a law of diminishing returns in pushing more and more students through university. (Vince Cable, 2010)<sup>13</sup>

Although this statement appears to promote and value diversity, and to value vocational education and training, it runs alongside a government emphasis on selecting out the most talented young people for study in the best universities. In this context, the application and admissions process may continue to act as a means of maintaining and reinforcing the inequalities of a post-compulsory 'tripartism', with 'élite, [global] HE for the few combined with a mass, local HE for the many and learningfare for the rest' (Ainley, 2003, p. 394). Under such conditions, Bourdieu's concept of 'field' is a particularly important tool to think with.

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### Notes

1. ISCED: International Standard Classification of Education. See ISCED (2012).
2. The UK Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission is an advisory Non-Departmental Public Body of the Department for Education. It was created in 2012 by the Welfare Reform Act, as an amendment to the Child Poverty Act 2010. The All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility was formed in 2011 to 'discuss and promote the cause of social mobility; to raise issues of concern and help inform policy makers and opinion formers'. <http://www.appg-socialmobility.org/> Accessed 7 June 2014.
3. <http://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/Study/> Accessed 17 June 2013.
4. 'In 2012–2013, the median net tuition fee for entrants to full-time first degrees registered at further education colleges was £6000. ... In contrast, the median net tuition fee for entrants to full-time first degrees registered and taught at HEIs was around £8700' (HEFCE, 2014, p. 13).
5. [http://www.ucas.ac.uk/about\\_us/howweare/annualreport](http://www.ucas.ac.uk/about_us/howweare/annualreport) (accessed 3 January 2010). Though few further education colleges that offer HE were part of UCAS at the time of the FurtherHigher project (2006–2008), many colleges have become members, so that applications to their full-time courses are now part of the official admissions infrastructure.
6. <http://www.ucas.com/reviews/admissionsprocessreview/> (accessed 5 March 2011).
7. [http://www.ucas.com/about\\_us/howweare/whatwedo](http://www.ucas.com/about_us/howweare/whatwedo) (accessed 15 February 2011).
8. Commercial services sell sample statements and offer to write or edit personal statements, with prices starting from UK £9.99, for example: [http://www.studential.com/guide/write\\_personal\\_statement.htm](http://www.studential.com/guide/write_personal_statement.htm) (£24 for a statement or editing of a statement); <http://www.getintouni.com/> (£9.99 for 60 sample statements; £39.99 for editing of a statement); <http://www.professional-cv-writingservices.co.uk/cvs/ucas-examples-personal-statements.html> (£20 for a personal statement) (all accessed April 2011).
9. The differentiation between 'selecting' and 'recruiting' institutions and courses has become part of standard discourses in English HE. See Admissions to Higher Education Review Group (2004, 15) and Centre for Education and Inclusion Research, Sheffield Hallam University and Institute for Access Studies, Staffordshire University, (2008, 22).

10. The FurtherHigher project was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) within its Teaching and Learning Research Programme under the title Universal Access and Dual Regimes of Further and Higher Education (RES-139-25-0245).
11. See Bathmaker (2009) for further details of research design and methods.
12. All names of people and institutions in the fieldwork data are pseudonyms.
13. The Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott made a very similar statement shortly before his conservative Liberal Party was elected to power in September 2013: 'Not everyone needs a university education ... reasonable public investment in higher education is not dudding poorer people to help richer people: it's strengthening our human capital in ways that ultimately benefit everyone' (Abbott, 2013). The case of Australia is discussed in further detail in a paper by Gale and Hodge (in press).

### Notes on contributor

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