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12. UNITED KINGDOM: FROM BINARY TO CONFUSION

INTRODUCTION

The United Kingdom has a truly mass system of higher education. The total number of higher education students enrolled in universities and colleges was 2.5 million in 2014/15 (Table 1). Many more are studying on lower-level technical education courses in further education colleges and on adult education courses. Because graduation rates have remained high in spite of very substantial expansion of student numbers in the past two decades, the UK is one of the largest-scale producers of university graduates in Europe. This is in contrast with the historical stereotype that UK higher education has remained comparatively selective in its student intake and elitist in its values. The UK is also one of the least differentiated systems in Europe, the former binary distinction between universities and polytechnics having been abandoned a quarter of a century ago. More than 80% of students are enrolled in relatively large and comprehensive universities that are not stratified into formal tiers (as would be the case in many US states) or divided into traditional universities or higher professional schools (as would be the case in much the rest of Europe). All universities engage in teaching and research, although there are substantial differences in the balance between these activities in individual institutions. All universities in the UK, and the majority of other higher education institutions, award the full range of academic qualifications from bachelors to doctoral degrees.

However, the mass scale of the system and its lack of formal differentiation, need to be qualified. The UK acquired its mass system a decade or more after many other major European countries and at least a generation after the United States. The number of students has increased by more than 50% since 2000. As a result, perhaps due to its comparatively recent evolution to become a mass system, UK higher education has retained many of the practices and mentalities more often associated with an elite system. To take two examples, completion and graduation rates have remained high, on average around 90% of initially enrolled students, and strong links between teaching and research have been maintained, based on a widespread belief that teachers

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in higher education should also be, to some degree, active researchers and scholars. The absence of formal differentiation of institutional roles has also not prevented the persistence, and even strengthening, of powerful reputational hierarchies, which are reflected in highly differentiated patterns of student recruitment, nor of differential patterns of funding, particularly with regard to research. In many respects UK higher education exhibits many of the social class characteristics that are alleged to be endemic in British society more generally.

Table 1: Enrollment by type of postsecondary institution by level of study and mode of study 2014/15, UK

Type of Institution	*Postgraduate*			*Undergraduate*			*Total HE students*
	Mode of study		*Total*	*Mode of study*		*Total*	
	Full-time	*Part-time*		*Full-time*	*Part-time*		
Russell Group	134,655	57,265	191,910	374,250	29,635	403,885	595,795
Pre-1992	72,370	55,640	128,000	266,675	153,410	420,070	548,060
Post 1992	87,120	114,150	201,290	699,050	147,500	846,550	1,047,815
Specialist	10,260	5,625	15,875	50,670	5,585	56,250	72,125
Further Education Colleges							189,635*
Private							50,245*
Total	304,405	232,680	537,075	1,390,645	336,130	1,726,755	2,503,675

Source: HESA (2016a); *HESA, (2016b)
HESA (2016b) Higher Education Statistics for the United Kingdom 2014/15.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION IN THE UK

The first decisive steps towards the creation of a mass system were taken in the 1960s, first with the publication in 1963 of the influential Robbins report which enunciated the principle that higher education should be available "to all those who wish to undertake it and have the ability to do so" (Committee of Higher Education 1963). Henceforward that principle has been unchallenged, even in times of severe budgetary constraint. The Robbins report not only endorsed large-scale growth in student numbers but also articulated the idea of a wider system that extended beyond the traditional universities. Until then higher education had been used to describe a level

of education not a system of institutions. Now previously unassociated fragments—traditional universities, teacher education colleges and so-called advanced further education—were brought together in a single system, conceptually and in terms of policy (Shattock 2012).

Later in that decade a formal binary system was developed that appeared to entrench a formal distinction between universities and the about-to-be-formed polytechnics. This decision was widely interpreted then, and still now by some, as a deliberate attempt to create greater mission differentiation. But this was only half true. Although it was argued that universities should concentrate more on academic, and polytechnics more on professional higher education, the formal distinction related to governance. The universities were regarded as autonomous, subject to the loosest of political oversight, while the polytechnics were subject (initially) to the control of local government. As the autonomy of the universities came to be eroded, and the polytechnics were granted greater operational freedom, this distinction lost much of its force. No attempt was ever made to limit polytechnics to offering specified levels of higher education: for example, bachelors (or possibly masters) programs. Finally, in order to become realistic alternatives to the traditional universities the polytechnics were created by the, sometimes forced, amalgamation of smaller technical, commercial and art colleges, thus creating large comprehensive institutions increasingly difficult to distinguish from their supposed rivals (Scott 2014). From the start the degree of differentiation represented by the binary system was weak and grew progressively weaker.

This system was abandoned in 1992. All polytechnics (and analogous higher professional education institutions in Scotland, where polytechnics had never been established) became universities. A single agency was formed to fund all higher education institutions in England, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Separate funding councils were established in Scotland and Wales. All institutions were funded for teaching according to a standardized formula, whether Oxford or Cambridge or the least favored former polytechnic. Although funding for research was (and is) distributed selectively according to the grades, from world leading to recognized nationally, and awarded mainly for research outputs as determined by successive Research Assessment Exercises (RAE), now the Research Excellence Framework (REF), all institutions remained eligible. HEFCE's rationale was "funding excellence wherever it is found". Inevitably research funding came to be concentrated in the most research-intensive universities, but the only attempt to establish a formal stratification floundered in the late 1980s and has never been revived.

Since 2000 substantial reforms of English higher education have taken place (BIS 2011 2015 2016a). In one view they amount to a paradigm shift, the rejection of an essentially public system of higher education and the substitution of a market system. Others have adopted a more nuanced assessment of these reforms, emphasizing instead their continuity with previous policy trends.

The most significant policy shift has been the re-introduction of tuition fees in England. These were initially set by government at a modest level, £1,000 a year, but have progressively increased. As a result, funding for teaching, except for high-cost subjects in science, engineering and medicine, is now provided by tuition paid by students rather than by direct grants via HEFCE. All full-time students are entitled to government-funded income-contingent loans from the state-owned Student Loans Company, repayable on graduation only when a graduate's income reaches a set level.

A second set of reforms has been designed to place greater emphasis on teaching and on the role of students as customers. Examples include Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) established in the early 2000s, the National Student Survey (NSS) which seeks to measure student satisfaction, established in 2005 and, most recently, a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) to mirror the REF and provide a basis on which institutions would be allowed to increase their tuition fees.

The reforms represent a complex mix of marketization and modernization. The idea of a market has been promoted by measures to ensure that students are better informed customers, the removal of any restrictions on the number of students individual institutions can recruit (with some important exceptions such as medicine), the opening-up of higher education to private, often for-profit, providers (often labelled challenger institutions) and the promotion of a culture of competition between institutions by publishing performance indicators, that form the basis of league-table rankings (Palfreyman & Tapper 2014.). Increasing emphasis has been placed on effective and efficient management, perhaps at the expense of academic self-government and collegial norms. There has also been a proliferation of different audit and assessment tools, promoting more explicit accountability and transparency regimes that may have compromised traditional notions of institutional autonomy and even academic freedom, because these tools have also made it more possible, and legitimate, to manage the performance of individual teachers and researchers. It is important to note that, while the development of higher education in the whole of the UK has been characterized by processes of modernization, only the English system has been exposed to the full force of marketization. In Scotland, as in most of Europe, students do not pay tuition fees.

POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION IN THE UK TODAY

The postsecondary education system in the UK today has four main components. The first and largest is the university sector, often sub-divided between so-called pre-1992 universities (traditional universities) and post-1992 universities (the former polytechnics). There is also a small number of universities that have been designated as such since 2000, mainly large colleges previously focused on teacher education.

The second component is smaller specialist institutions, generally in art, music and drama, which until recently were not large enough to be eligible to receive university

titles. Some arts-based universities have been established through federations of small colleges, the best example of which is the University of the Arts London that includes among its component colleges highly regarded institutions such as Central St Martins, the alma matter of many leading designers.

The third component is made up of a large number of further education colleges that offer higher education programs in addition to lower-level technical, vocational and adult education, and also upper secondary education. Some are substantial providers of higher education in their local communities; others offer only a small number of niche courses. They are similar to US community colleges.

The fourth, and most recent, component comprises private institutions. For almost three decades the University of Buckingham was a lonely example, but in the past five years it has been joined by seven other private institutions with university titles and able to award their own degrees. The majority of these new private providers are for-profit institutions, including BPP University, a subsidiary of the US-based Apollo Group. There is also a growing number of smaller private colleges, mainly offering business and management and ICT programs. Up to now they have been unable to offer their own qualifications but have been franchised to award qualifications from degree-awarding public institutions, although the government plans to make it easier for private providers to award their own degrees and to acquire the title of university.

GOVERNANCE

There are detailed differences between the governance arrangements for particular types of postsecondary education institutions in the UK. However, in practice, all public institutions are governed in similar ways. All are established as independent legal entities with own their buildings and other assets and employ their own staff. All, with the partial exceptions of Oxford and Cambridge, are governed by councils or boards on which lay members from outside the institutions hold a majority of places with some provision for elected staff and student representatives. The council shares power with the senate, or academic board, that is responsible for academic affairs. This has been described as shared government, or even academic government. But, as institutions have come to be regarded as corporate organizations responsible for determining their own business strategies, the tendency has been for councils to gain influence and for the jurisdiction of senates to be restricted. The role of senior managers, vice-chancellors/principals and their senior academic and professional services colleagues, has also been substantially enhanced. The governance of private institutions does not follow this pattern. A few, non-profit charities, broadly conform to the model for public institutions, but most are governed according to commercial company law and, crucially, their ownership can be bought and sold.

As a result, the degree of effective differentiation in governance among UK institutions is limited, with the exception of Oxford and Cambridge and private for-profit institutions. There has been a debate about the continuing relevance of public and private as labels to describe the status of institutions. It is argued that all UK institutions are private, in the sense that they are independent legal corporations and have never been part of state bureaucracies. However, all remain subject to a substantial, and arguably increasing, degree of government regulation.

However, in more research-intensive universities the views of academic staff are given great weight by lay-dominated councils. In most post-1992 universities the academic board was always subordinated to the authority of the council or board, and academic staff are more likely to see their relationship with their institutions as that of employees. But it would be misleading to establish too sharp a demarcation between collegial and managerial institutions. First, nearly all UK institutions have aspects of both in their governance, although with different emphases. The advance of massification has not sharpened this demarcation, rather the reverse as all institutions have developed more managerial cultures. Secondly, largely as a result of the growing complexity and heterogeneity of institutional missions, all universities have acquired more extensive and more professional administrations and a shift towards more managerial practices.

The most significant formal distinction between different types of institutions is between those that are able to award their own degrees and those that must rely on degree-awarding institutions to validate their courses or to offer university courses on a franchise basis. All public universities, whether pre or post-1992, have the right to make a full range of academic awards, from bachelors to doctoral degrees. A small number of other institutions have the right to award "taught" degrees, bachelors and masters degrees, but not research or doctoral degrees. So far seven private universities and five further education colleges have been granted "taught" degree awarding powers. But other private institutions and public further education colleges are only able to offer higher education programs under the auspices of universities. In England, the government has proposed that the threshold for institutions being awarded teaching-degree awarding powers (TDAP) and also university titles should be lowered with the intention of allowing private institutions to compete more vigorously with public institutions with the result that that in future many more institutions will have TDAP. As a result, this form of differentiation is likely to be eroded.

In legal terms most UK institutions enjoy a high degree of autonomy. In practice that autonomy is constrained by the need to meet government-determined criteria to be eligible for public funding including student loans; in the case of public institutions, funding council requirements regarding financial and management efficiencies; participation in the REF when eligible to receive research funding; the ability to satisfy access and quality assurance requirements. UK universities and colleges are caught in a web of requirements that substantially restrict their actual independence.

In the case of academic freedom there are very limited legal safeguards to protect academic freedom: teachers and researchers enjoy no special privileges not available to all citizens. The debate in the UK rather has been whether, indirectly, academic freedom has been eroded by the audit and assessment regimes to which institutions are subject, and also by a political and academic climate that favors conformity rather than independence.

ACCESS

There has always been a free market allowing access to higher education in the UK. All students are free to apply to any institution, and every institution is free to select students according to its own criteria. There is no legal entitlement to a place in higher education although, as has already been made clear, the Robbins principle that places should be provided for all qualified students has persisted and the probability that particular students will be admitted to particular institutions (or courses) is determined by supply and demand, the number of places made available and the number of applicants. Similarly, all institutions with full degree awarding powers may offer as many, or as few, places on their courses as they wish, set their own entry standards and also determine which courses they should offer.

However, this free market in both student and institutional choice is constrained in a number of ways. Before tuition fees were introduced in 1998 in England, the total number of students that could be enrolled in higher education was capped, essentially to limit public expenditure, and individual universities had individual caps. Even after the introduction of fees these caps remained, because most students were (and are) entitled to receive government-funded loans. However, in 2015 the caps were removed and all institutions are now free to determine their own enrollments. The most important constraint that remains is that where institutions charge tuition of £6,000 a year or above they must have access agreements with the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). This body was established in 2006 because of concerns that tuition increases would disproportionately discourage students from disadvantaged families and communities from enrolling. In 2015, young people from disadvantaged areas were two and half times less likely to enter higher education than their more advantaged peers, and eight and a half times less likely to enroll in the most selective universities. Less important constraints include restrictions placed by professional bodies on both the total number and entry qualifications of students enrolled on courses leading to professional accreditation, and the indirect effect of rankings and league tables that may discourage institutions from admitting too many students with inferior qualifications.

QUALITY ASSURANCE AND RANKINGS

Quality assurance operates at two levels in UK higher education. Institutions have always operated elaborate systems of external examiners to ensure that all degrees

are of broadly equivalent standard. External examiners from other institutions are members of examination boards for individual courses, and review procedures for conducting examinations. In the past two decades most institutions have developed more elaborate systems of course review, generally involving student feedback. Overall there has been a strong movement towards the professionalization of both quality assurance and teaching standards that, although a voluntary initiative undertaken by institutions, individually and collectively, has been enshrined in agreed codes of good practice that command widespread support.

External quality assurance mechanisms are mainly the responsibility of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), a national body owned by institutions collectively. Initially the QAA undertook detailed inspections of individual departments in universities and colleges, conducted by teams of peer reviewers and intended to promote good practice. These were replaced a decade ago by a light-touch system, based on whole institution audits focusing on whether the necessary procedures were in place rather than detailed outcomes. Currently this system of institutional audits is being reviewed, with the most likely outcome of an even "lighter-touch" methodology based on assessment of risk (In other words, more recently established institutions would be subject to a greater degree of scrutiny than traditional universities with high academic stature.).

National Student Survey (NSS) scores provide one of the most important ingredients in the rankings that have proliferated in the UK since 2000. The outcomes of the REF are also translated into similar scores that are intended to measure comparative research performance. Rankings also incorporate published data on the entry standards of newly admitted students based on secondary school examination results, employment rates and expenditure patterns within individual institutions. The appetite within UK higher education for these rankings to measure comparative performance, guide management action and strengthen brands, has been irresistible. These rankings also resonate with the more consumerist orientation that English politicians seek to stimulate a quasi-market in higher education, and with the global demand for the identification of the world's top universities.

THE ROLE OF RESEARCH UNIVERSITIES

It is a paradox that the UK is the home of some of the most highly regarded of these top universities, second only to the United States, but differentiation between research universities and other postsecondary education institutions remains weak. A second, and almost as intractable difficulty is that in the UK there is a strong belief that all universities must engage in teaching and research, and offer courses at all levels, from bachelors to doctoral degrees, albeit in different proportions.

The distinction between pre-1992 and post-1992 universities, in other words traditional universities and former polytechnics, has been eroded. This convergence can

be partly explained in terms of academic drift as the post-1992 universities allegedly have aped and emulated the pre-1992 universities, although a more substantial explanation is that all institutions have taken on new roles to meet 21st century challenges. Several post-1992 universities have been more successful in successive Research Assessment Exercises (RAE), and now the Research Excellence Framework (REF), than some pre-1992 universities. This overlap between the two sectors is confirmed by rankings. If this distinction has ceased to be valid in the context of research performance, the same is true in terms of market position as indicated by student demand. There has also been an attempt to draw a distinction between selecting and recruiting institutions, in other words between those able to select their students and those that must battle to recruit students. However, although broadly true at the highest level, more detailed examination of student choices reveals a more complex picture in which the relative popularity of subjects is as significant as the attractiveness of types of institution.

A more plausible definition of research universities in the UK would be to align it with membership of the Russell Group. The Russell Group has been equated with the top universities, a characterization that has been widely adopted in the media and by politicians but lacks detailed specificity. However, even this tighter definition of research university runs into difficulty. There is clearly a small group of UK universities that significantly outperform the others: Oxford, Cambridge, University College London, Imperial College and (more debatably) the London School of Economics and University of Manchester. There are also a number of Russell Group universities that are difficult to distinguish in terms of research performance and ranking positions from several other pre-1992 universities, and even some post-1992 universities. This lack of precision about what constitutes a research university has made it difficult to produce a systematic differentiation (or stratification) of institutional roles that would be routinely accepted in other countries.

Table 2: Types of postsecondary institutions 2014/2015 UK

Type of institution	*Number*
Russell Group	24
Pre-1992	34
Post-1992	68
Specialist	34
Further Education Colleges	5
Private	9
Total	174

Source: Derived from HESA, (2016a); HEFCE, (2016a); HEFCE (2016b).

This has presented a number of policy difficulties. A good example is the Research Assessment Exercise (currently the Research Excellence Framework). On the one hand, it has tended to concentrate research funding in a small number of large research intensive universities; on the other it has served as a powerful mechanism to promote a stronger research culture, and arguably increase the incentive to focus on research, across all higher education institutions. Similarly, the access requirements imposed by OFFA, and a wider sense of institutional obligation to address social equity, mean that all universities, even those with the most socially exclusive and privileged student intakes, focus on the recruitment of students from under-represented groups. As a result, it has been difficult to develop detailed policies to promote explicit differentiation. Moreover it is clear that, despite a public discourse that appears to privilege the top universities, there is almost no political support for formal stratification of the system into research universities and other postsecondary education institutions.

Even if hard differentiation cannot be achieved in the UK, the existence of a mass system has made it easier to pursue softer forms of differentiation, rather than hard differentiation mandated by law or determined by formal stratification into distinct types of institution, than in a smaller and more selective university-dominated system such as existed in the past.

The promotion of private, for-profit institutions, and of more extensive provision in further education colleges might promote new forms of mission differentiation. If a substantial, and more influential, number of postsecondary education institutions came to espouse a new learning ecology that focused more heavily on the delivery of teaching programs and downplayed the importance of research and scholarship, this could, over time, encourage some other universities to follow a similar course, if only to protect their market positions. The result could be creeping mission differentiation from the bottom that, in the fullness of time, could lead to the emergence of a *de facto* research university sector by a process of default.

CONCLUSION

Since the 1960s UK higher education has been characterized by an erosion of formal processes of differentiation. First, universities came to be associated with other postsecondary education institutions in newly conceived and operationalized higher education systems. Then from 1966 until 1992 the non-university sector came to be dominated by large multi-faculty polytechnics, that increasingly took on many of the characteristics of universities. The formal differentiation between universities and polytechnics consisted more of questions of ownership: universities were autonomous, while polytechnics remained subject to the control of city and council administrations until 1987. Since 1992 the UK has had an undifferentiated system of higher education. One factor that has encouraged this sustained process of formal de-differentiation has been the comparatively weak patterns of articulation within

the UK system. Although systems of credit recognition, transfer and accumulation were developed, only small numbers of students took advantage of these systems with the exception of students moving on from higher technician diplomas to degree programs. This is in sharp contrast with the US where it is common for students to transfer institution, especially within formally stratified state systems, but atypical of most European systems.

However, it would be a mistake to confuse this absence of differentiation with a lack of diversity. Institutions have become much more internally heterogeneous as they have taken on new roles in community outreach, applied research and technology transfer, and even commercial activities. They have also responded to new student demands for part-time courses, flexible study patterns or online delivery. At the same time institutions have coalesced into informal groups, either willingly in the form of so-called mission groups. The best examples are the Russell Group of research-intensive universities and Million +, that brings together most of the former polytechnics, or as a result of the impact of rankings and league tables. And formal processes of differentiation have not disappeared entirely. A distinction exists between degree-awarding institutions (currently public universities) and non-degree-awarding institutions (private providers and public colleges), although this distinction is now likely to be eroded. There are also the differences between English, Welsh and (especially) Scottish higher education systems, that are certain to increase.

More formal processes of differentiation are also re-emerging in England. Already the removal of the cap on the number of students that individual institutions can admit has tended to sharpen the distinction between selecting and recruiting universities, which may sharpen still further if demographic patterns and less buoyant prospects for graduate employment lead to a downturn in overall demand for higher education.

A Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) is being introduced to mirror the REF, that will encourage greater selectivity as institutions are given gold, silver or bronze awards to reflect the quality of their provision. The establishment of a new body, UK Research and Innovation, to oversee both the distribution of core research funding to institutions and also supervise the research councils that fund individual projects, could lead to even greater concentration of research in a smaller number of universities in the medium term. There has even been a proposal that the conditions under which international students are granted visas to study in the UK might be varied according to the quality of the institutions in which they are enrolled with the clear implication that less prestigious institutions might have greater obstacles placed in the way of recruiting international students. Although these, and similar, policies remain at an early stage of development, their aggregate and cumulative effect could well be to reverse half a century or more of de-differentiation in UK higher education.

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