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Convergence and Divergence in the Global Model of Mass Higher Education: Predictions for 2010¹

The obvious context for these thoughts is the current UK government's preoccupation with expanding participation in higher education and diversifying its social composition. Not an unimportant change but perhaps rather insignificant in comparison to the broader changes driven by the link between the increasingly global character of higher education (institutions within an internationally competitive market) and the national imperatives to redefine higher education as a resource that should serve the interests of society at large, and especially (indeed, for some, exclusively) its economic interests. Moreover, it is important to note that these changes are occurring within an increasingly demanding trans-national political environment of which the EU probably represents the best example (note the Bologna Declaration and the ambition to create an 'EU Higher Education Area' by 2010). The national pressures for change need to be sensitive to the international context but, sensitive or not, state systems cannot develop in isolation even if there are those who believe otherwise.

At the international level there is the steady expansion of competition for students at both undergraduate and, even more so, postgraduate levels. This takes various forms:

1. Students move between national systems as they seek 'the best deals'.
2. There are institutional links between universities within different countries which facilitate two-way flows of students (as well as faculty/administrative personnel).

¹ 2010 should not be taken literally. We are alluding to an emerging state of affairs but by 2010 we would expect our predictions to be steadily unfolding.

3. Universities either create 'foreign' outposts or they validate/franchise courses constructed and taught locally.
4. The rise of e-universities or universities with electronic campuses

There are parallel developments in relation to research: the movement of research faculty and facilities, the sharing of projects and the creation of international research centres.

The question is how national systems adjust in order to cope with the increasing globalisation of the core functions of higher education, that is teaching and research. There will be a continuing role for the state because the key functions that universities undertake are of critical political importance. Governments of different persuasions, because they have contrasting agendas, will select varying points of intervention. For example, it is difficult to imagine a Conservative government within the UK prioritising the social diversification of access to higher education to the extent of the current Blair Government. However, there are two main universal state inputs: a continuing financial input and the construction of accountability mechanisms. The level, form and targeting of the financial input will vary as will the character of the accountability mechanisms – their focus, shape and intensity. Moreover, given the demographics of an aging population in many OECD countries there will be pressure on public funding for HE, with the result that increasingly the financial input of the state will need to be complemented by a market input. This will consist of student/family resources for the payment of higher tuition fees, charitable foundations releasing monies for both research and student support, and corporate sponsored research.

A diverse, stratified, hierarchical (but possibly 'joined-up') system of higher education seems the most realistic (and likely) response to the steady globalisation of research and teaching in higher education, and the most likely product of the changing relationship between the state and the market in its delivery. Whereas the bureaucratic impulse of the state may seek uniformity, the political impulse is likely to contain contrasting messages but the market will stimulate diversity. The end product will be a flexible system in which change, diversity and overlapping functions interact with stability, the pursuit of different purposes and stratification. Global change is not a neat and tidy process and neither is the accommodation between the state and market set in stone.

What in concrete terms is this likely to mean for the system of British higher education in 2010? The process of the rapid expansion of undergraduate numbers will have peaked. Growth is still likely but at a slower pace and embracing segments of the population older than the traditional 18 to 22-aged cohort (perhaps even the ever-growing over 55 segment of the population – 'Saga Students'!). It will also be more diverse in social class terms but not significantly so and with a selective pattern of incorporation. Consequently, with the notable exception of women, social diversification will be concentrated upon the new (i.e. post-1992) universities and higher education programmes in the colleges of further education, that is the new Foundation Degrees matching the 2-year Associate Degrees offered in the US community colleges. The student experience splinters further: part-time versus full-time, campus versus home-based residence, traditional courses versus new degree programmes, and even attendance in new 'for-profit' institutions as opposed to as now in exclusively quasi-public sector, 'not-for-profit' HEIs. There is a trade-off

between expanding and diversifying access and securing high-completion rates. The former impulse prevails and with it the boundary between the world of higher education and the wider society is further eroded. Just as the completion of an undergraduate degree programme becomes an increasingly protracted process, never to be achieved in some cases, so successful undergraduates embark upon obtaining further qualifications – invariably of a professional or vocational character – as they seek to gain an edge in the job market.

It is difficult to imagine that the cap imposed upon fee levels in the 2004 Higher Education Act will persist. This is essentially a political compromise to placate potentially rebellious Labour MPs and, whilst it may ease the financial difficulties of HEIs, it does nothing to resolve them. So, as the political context changes, one can expect by 2010 universities in the UK (as also increasingly in the rest of the ‘Anglosphere’ beyond the USA) to charge fees that reflect the real cost of their degree programmes as well as their market position. Of course there will be political pressure upon the universities to ensure that, in spite of this development, they strive to ensure their admissions policies are meritocratic: full-cost fees do not exclude the talented poor. Thus we can expect both state grants and institutionally provided financial packages for the students from poorer families, but it would be naïve to imagine that money and social connections will not continue to exert, as they undoubtedly do now, an influence. The issue is whether we will have more or less equity. Ironically, too much stress on equity, however, may mean canny middle-class families deserting UK higher education as they head for the US private Liberal Arts and Ivy League universities. In 2020 will Leo Blair studying at an American

university, just as Chancellor Kohl's two sons were educated in US rather than German higher education institutions in the 1990s?

The academic role has tended to become more specialised over time. The idea, even at the collegiate universities, that academics at large are both capable of, and interested in, pursuing administrative responsibilities has steadily declined. The transference of roles is still common but the idea of a rotation of key office-holders smacks of amateurism. The current major struggle concerns the relationship of teaching and research. Whatever the synergy between the two may, or may not, be the reality is that they are increasingly separated with, of course, the important exception – especially in the sciences – of the close affinity between research and doctoral/post-doctoral training. This does not mean that we can expect a neat and tidy division between research-led and teaching-only universities, but we can expect some sharp differences at the two ends of the continuum (a smallish research-led end and a much larger teaching-only end) with most British universities containing pockets of 'research excellence' within a teaching profile that moves steadily towards postgraduate studies with a large taught MA element composed predominantly of non-UK/EU students. The latter development is all the more likely if the proposed cap on undergraduate fees prevails. Although the institutional divide in terms of research and teaching may not be sharply defined, it is likely that within all institutions the individual academic role will become more polarised as universities make decisions about maximising their research strengths. The ensuing internal political strife may be intense, and the ideology of the rounded academic role could take longer to change than the reality, but the trend is there for all to see. As

managerialism triumphs collegiality in governance terms so the academic labour force will be ever-more casualised as HE is commodified.

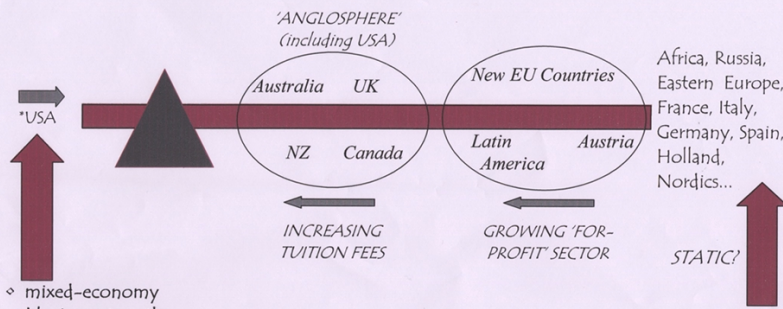
The classical humanist interpretation of the university as the embodiment of a tradition that embraces the pursuit of scholarship in the form of transmitting and expanding the truth as an end in itself has always been idealistic. Universities have invariably been intimately linked to the state and tied to the dominant forces in society. But this is not to deny that they also pursued, with varying degrees of integrity, their classical purpose. And they still continue to pursue that purpose. However, it is a pursuit that becomes more difficult as both state and society, and particularly the market, bear down upon them more intently. Moreover, as teaching and research increasingly become not so much worthwhile ends in their own right but rather the means to other ends so the purpose of the university changes: to assist in the promotion of regional development, to promote social mobility and to provide a base for entrepreneurial activities. Again within a differentiated model of higher education it is highly likely that universities will be selective in their embracing of new goals or perhaps selective as to where these are to be incorporated into the campus. University institutions may come to share the same letterhead (in part) but have little else in common.

The globalisation of higher education presupposes the erosion of national identities but it would be naïve not to recognise that the pressures for change are spread unevenly and that some systems are better equipped to respond to them than others in the sense that they have fewer adjustments to make. It is not uncommon for the United States to be seen as the future model: the first mass model of higher education

which combines a range of diverse institutions with very contrasting missions and an almost unique blend of mixed-economy, public and private inputs that sponsor a powerful tradition of service to the local community - universities as teaching 'useful knowledge' and engaging in 'research with practical pay-offs' or, to quote Clark Kerr, universities as 'service stations'. And, perhaps more significantly, there is the sheer size and influence of American higher education, in that it creates global trends rather than responds to them. While this may be to overstate the case, it does raise the question of what is unique in the British tradition of higher education that is worth preserving and how this is to be achieved. And, in terms of the United States, whether influence could possibly carry too high a price – an uncritical complacency?

However, that said, increased political accountability coupled with 'performance-funding' for the American public sector of higher education, along with consumer/political pressure to curtail ever-increasing tuition fees in its private sector, may in fact push US higher education close to the 'Anglosphere' nations as they move towards the US model via marketisation, especially in the form of higher tuition fees. Whether mainland European systems can remain static or will shift along the continuum towards the US fee-charging, market-driven, public-private model in the wake of the UK, Canada, Australia and the USA may not be clear by 2010. However, by 2020 our vision is for HE systems to be converging either under increasing financial pressure in the gloom of the Bermuda Triangle or to be basking in the sunny Azores as an expanding worldwide industry.

The Continuum of HE Systems - Convergence in the Bermuda Triangle or in the Azores?



- ◊ mixed-economy public/ private with high fees;
- ◊ ruthless hierarchy/ stratification and immense diversity among HEIs, including a top tier commanding global prestige/ branding
- ◊ sizeable 'for-profit' sector

* Consumer-resistance to ever-increasing tuition fees in private HEIs; plus increasing political interference/ accountability/ performance-funding for public HEIs.

- ◊ 'nationalised industry state/ public HE systems with low/ no fees;
- ◊ homogeneous mediocrity amongst HEIs opting out of the race for global status/ branding

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