

Higher education campus trajectories: causes and consequences

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Outline

In the 2011 white paper *Students at the Heart of the System* the UK government called for a “diverse, competitive system that can offer different types of higher education so that students can choose freely between a range of providers.” (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2011). Along with the introduction of a new undergraduate fee regime in 2012 this is one of a number of developments in the marketisation of UK higher education (Brown with Carasso, 2013).

Isomorphism as described by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) is a process of homogenisation within organisational fields generally and it has been discussed at global levels. Cai (2010) talks about the concept of global isomorphism and the impact this has had on Chinese higher education. Stensaker and Dahl Norgard (2001) write about a Norwegian case study and the battle faced between being innovative whilst also being under pressures to standardise. They note that despite dependence on external factors that can drive isomorphism there is still a need for organisations to find their own unique niche.

This paper forms part of ongoing work to study the evolving operational models of higher education campuses in the UK, linking these to global trends such as isomorphism, UK higher education policy and theories of change (Kezar, 2014).

Using a precise definition of “satellite”, based on the work of Scott et al (2007) previous research has focussed on different approaches adopted by universities in England that operate a main campus and satellite model (Gaskell, 2012). Building on that work, this study takes a broader view of models and structures adopted by multi-campus institutions more generally, both in the UK and overseas (Gaskell and Hayton 2014), and investigates some of the emerging institutional forms. The work highlights the internal strategies and external policies that contribute to the directions that campuses take.

The initial focus was on eleven English institutions. Quantitative data analysis enabled a better understanding of the relative sizes and nature of UK campuses. Detailed semi-structured interviews were then conducted with senior members of staff within the institutions, based at the main and satellite sites. When the scope of the work was subsequently broadened to encompass campuses more generally, further interviews were undertaken and a number of detailed case studies were developed, each illustrating a different approach.

The gaining prominence of group structures was noted as a particularly important development in facilitating increasing institutional diversity. There are a number of examples of group structures that increasingly involve ventures overseas or campuses with missions that are distinctive from the main university. Organisations from outside of the higher education sector such as further education colleges and commercial enterprises can also be involved in group structures increasing the diversity and stretching the definitions of both a campus and a university.

The research included models involving campuses based overseas and also campuses of non-UK institutions being set up within the UK. The latter can be “invisible” in the UK however they form part of a global system whereby students from overseas can study in the UK but within their “home” education system. Our study also encompassed collaborations with non-education partners such as local authorities and business ventures that had been

set up jointly by co-located higher education institutions to enable efficient service delivery for their students.

Analysis of the data gained from interviews with leaders, desk research and setting this in the UK and international higher education policy context has enabled us to categorise the trajectories of campuses (large and small) and relate them to the broader evolution of the UK higher education system. A number of trajectories are evident and the data suggests strategy, structure and leadership are fundamental issues that need to be aligned to enable a successful development track.

The trajectories identified for campuses cover a wide spectrum and include both growth and fall directions. They represent changes in focus, changes in ownership and changes of status both within the institution and within the sector generally. In some ways the trajectories can represent a cyclical phenomenon where a campus may move between different states over a period of time. The cycle could include being owned by different institutions, diversifying the curriculum provided or having to adapt to deliver particular institutional objectives.

As the sector continues to develop the concept of a campus and indeed that of a higher education institution is becoming less clearly defined; “the traditional university is being unbundled” (Barber et al, 2013). Institutions looking to sharpen up their strategies and re-organise may view some of their existing campuses as challenging legacies. At the same time others will be taking an entrepreneurial approach, looking to acquire or develop new campuses at home or overseas. The combined effect changes the system as a whole. Gaining a better understanding of the campus trajectories and the key internal and external drivers for them will become increasingly important, and this research makes a contribution towards that.

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