

One system or four? Cross-border applications and entries to full-time undergraduate courses in the UK since devolution

Outline

Higher education (HE) has been administered separately in Scotland and Wales since 1992 and for longer in Northern Ireland. In 1998-99 these separate arrangements were placed under the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales and (subject to delays and suspensions) the Northern Ireland Assembly. Writing when the prospects for parliamentary devolution were still uncertain, Rees and Istance (1997, p. 59) distinguished between HE as an *administrative system*, reflected in separate governance arrangements generating distinctive policies, and HE as a *social system*, a 'set of social processes framed by the administrative system'. Welsh HE had recently become a more distinct administrative system, but it remained part of an integrated social system of recruitment and participation which embraced both England and Wales. Nearly a decade later Rees and Taylor (2006) suggested that the early years of parliamentary devolution had seen the partial re-emergence of Welsh HE as a social system, reflected in a growing tendency for Welsh students to study in Wales, and for students in Welsh institutions to be Welsh-domiciled. They speculated that policies then being implemented could further encourage this trend.

This paper asks: to what extent has the (re-)emergence of more distinct administrative systems of HE in the UK's four home countries led to their (re-)emergence as more distinct social systems as defined by their patterns of recruitment? Specifically, how likely are applicants in each home country to apply to, and to enter, institutions in the rest of the UK (RUK), and has this changed?

These questions are addressed using data on applicants, applications and entries through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) to full-time undergraduate programmes in HE institutions in 1996, 2000, 2004, 2006, 2008 and 2010. The paper is a product of the project on *Changing transitions to a differentiated HE system*, funded by the Nuffield Foundation.

Across the UK, a majority of learners apply to, and enter, HE institutions within their own home country. Applications within the home country have been more likely to result in entry, suggesting that many RUK applications are either aspirational or fall-back choices. In all four home countries RUK applications and entries have declined and home-country applications have increased as a proportion of the total.

The flows between the four HE systems appear different when viewed from an outflow perspective (where do people domiciled in each home country apply to or enter HE?) and an inflow perspective (where do applicants and entrants to HE in each country come from?). From an outflow perspective, England and Scotland are the most self-contained HE systems,

with small and shrinking fractions of their domiciled learners applying to or entering RUK institutions. Wales and Northern Ireland have much higher student outflows, although these have declined over time and especially under the influence of differential fees or support arrangements (eg in Wales in 2006 and 2008) or an increased availability of places at home (eg in Northern Ireland between 1996 and 2004). From an outflow perspective, England and Northern Ireland are the most self-contained systems, with relatively low proportions of RUK applicants and entrants, easily outnumbered by those from other EU or overseas countries. Despite this, because of its scale England has been the principal destination for students leaving the three other home countries, having displaced Scotland as the first RUK choice of Northern Ireland students.

RUK applicants and entrants have tended to be well-qualified and middle-class and to apply to study medicine, dentistry or veterinary medicine, or arts subjects, at a Russell Group university. However, there have been variations around these general patterns. A significant proportion of Welsh and Northern Irish applicants to English institutions, and an even higher proportion of entrants, choose post-1992 universities. The correlation between qualification levels and RUK applications is not always reflected in actual entry. In England the highest qualification group is the most likely to apply to an RUK institution but not the most likely to enter one. In Northern Ireland (and Scotland) the lowest qualification group have also been more likely to enter RUK institutions, partly due to the local shortage of places and consequent high entry requirements (Cormack et al. 2006). English ethnic minorities have been less likely than whites to apply to and enter RUK institutions, whereas ethnic minorities domiciled in Wales, Northern Ireland or Scotland have been more likely to do so. Therefore, the picture of a two-tier structure in which advantaged students and elite universities inhabit a UK-wide system and other students and institutions inhabit more narrowly bounded systems is not supported by the evidence. The real pattern is complicated by the intersecting influences of ethnicity, subject preferences and the supply of places.

Our analyses suggest that devolution, and the consequent (re-)emergence of more distinct administrative systems of higher education, have contributed towards the trend towards more distinct social systems of HE. Fee differentials have encouraged home-country study, as have other policies that increased the differences between HE systems (Fitz 2007, Osborne 2007). There has been a general trend towards studying in the home region (Holdsworth 2009) but the trend towards home-country study has been stronger. Our analyses precede any impacts of the fee changes following the Browne Review (2010), but they provide a baseline for assessing its impact and a reminder that its impacts are likely to intensify trends that were already under way.

References

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