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Higher education as a system: a conceptual approach (0603)

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Abstract

With particular, although not exclusive, reference to England, this paper explores the appropriateness of describing higher education as a system. It has two main purposes: to explore the grounds for labelling English higher education as a system and to argue that, because this is no longer an appropriate label, a different conceptualisation is required. It will be hypothesised that the English (indeed, the British) model of higher education is better described as an increasingly internally differentiated network of sectors rather than as a system. The argument is that there has been a steady emergence of flexible sectors, which both converge and diversify. However, there is a danger that the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, rather than sustaining flexible sectors, could intensify the nascent shift in the direction of stratification marked by increasing differentiation between sectors as they converge internally.

Paper

The focus of this paper, with particular reference to higher education in England, is to explore what is meant by 'a system of higher education'. Three issues will be addressed. *First*, if in the recent past it was appropriate to describe the English universities as constituting a system, what were its defining characteristics? Or, to put it more prosaically, what made it a system? *Second*, how secure a system was it? Were its foundations deep and strong or shallow and weak? *Third*, and more importantly, is a new model of higher education (HE) emerging, one that can no longer be aptly described as a system? Has the time come, therefore, to apply a different label and, if so, what is a more appropriate collective description? Even if there is a wish to retain the term system as a convenient descriptive label, it should be recognised that the character of HE has changed markedly over time to make it a different system from what it was but a short while ago.

Historically, there have been several approaches to the analysis of change in British HE. For example, there is Halsey's emphasis on the decline of donnish dominion (Halsey, 1995); Tight's essentially descriptive overview of the evolution of its main characteristics since 1945 (Tight, 2009); Salter and Tapper's analysis of the changing relationship between HE and state institutions (Salter and Tapper, 1994) and Rothblatt's focussed demonstration of the subtle interplay between social change and the reform of Cambridge in the latter half of the 19th century (Rothblatt, 1968). This paper moves beyond these approaches to argue that the key to researching structural change in HE is the dissection of the evolving relationship between state and market forces as they interact with the institutional alliances that are to be found in the HE sector. It is this relationship that constructs the system.

This is to justify conceptual analysis in utilitarian terms: as an aid to constructing an approach that assists the understanding of the changing character of English HE. In 1996, under the title *The Creation of a University System*, Shattock brought together, a series of articles that had first appeared, in the *Universities* (subsequently, *Higher Education*) Quarterly. In his introductory preface he wrote that the purpose of the collection was to trace: '... the creation of a British higher education system from a small untidy post-war collection of university institutions containing no more than 51,600 students to the highly structured state-run higher education system of today with its 1.5 million students.' (Shattock, 1996, p. xi) It is the contention of this paper that the study of HE also needs to develop a deeper conceptual approach to its research material.

The paper will show how the changing relationship of the state, the market and HE over the past thirty years has determined in what sense the English universities can be said to constitute a system. All the significant developments will be drawn upon in this paper (the passage of the 1988, 1992, 2004 and 2017 Acts, the instigation of the research assessment exercises, the quality assurance régime and the widening participation agenda) have occurred since the government imposed-cuts of 1981–1982, which the University Grants Committee took responsibility for administering. While such central direction suggested that higher education constituted a system, in the sense that change could be managed effectively from the centre, it also opened the Pandora's box of officially sponsored attempts to distribute resources selectively (inequitably or not is another issue). How long would it be before this process led beyond a targeted distribution of resources to serious system fragmentation?

In spite of the parliamentary approval that underwrote the extension of the university title, it is evident that there is now (at best) a system of HE rather than a university system. This is a looser and more appropriate label, reinforced by the fact that in part the expansion of HE has taken place in the colleges of further education, which leads to the possibility of describing all postsecondary education as belonging to the tertiary sector. If there ever was a university system in the UK it existed prior to 1992 and has been disappearing steadily ever since. Even in the construction of a system of higher education there was little attempt to establish more than procedural ties between the institutions and the state and certainly very little by way of planning. The parts were interconnected not by a common relationship to each other but indirectly by their shared links to the state, which served to generate procedural ties but not a coherent system with equitable inputs and co-ordinated outputs.

This paper suggests that the fragmentation of British HE has led to the emergence of sectors: groups of universities, with overlapping identities, which are organised to protect their self-interests. These are groups that are akin to very loose confederations in which individual universities attempt to respond effectively to both state pressure and market opportunities. Shifting practices and values within the universities are designed to protect institutional interests rather than system coherence, while the group co-operation serves the purpose of enhancing effective political action in relation to specific policy issues. What appears to have emerged is a political system of HE built around a complex pattern of interactions embracing the state and quasi-state apparatus, market pressures, the organised groups of which the university interests are but one component and the individual universities themselves. It is a system marked by policy struggle in the form of pressure group politics underwritten by the evolution of policy networks (formed mainly of stakeholder and institutional alliances) operating within parameters established by the state and quasi-state. It is a system composed of overlapping, competing and somewhat unstable sectors. As such it is a very different conception of a system that historically has underwritten implicitly the idea of British HE: a model driven by shared values and practices and linked to state and society by more equitable procedural arrangements.

References

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Rothblatt, S. (1968) *The Revolution of the Dons*. Faber and Faber: London.
Salter, B. and Tapper, T. (1994) *The State and Higher Education*. Ilford: Woburn Press.
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