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## Higher education in England and Wales: unification, stratification or diversification?

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### *Abstract*

The author summarizes the main traits of the policy of unification in the English and Welsh sector of higher education. He asks for the benefit the former polytechnics could derive from this process. In the former so-called binary system the polytechnics had cultivated their strength to attract target groups who usually were reserved to enrol into university programs. Yet within the unified university sector which emerged by granting the polytechnics the status of universities this strength has been devaluated. Together with the unification of the sector new methods of financing and quality assessment have been established which favour the traditional universities and enclose the former polytechnics in the lower half of the nation-wide ranking list. The author recommends to the universities of his country to focus on differences of missions instead of competing for money and to start new relations to their environments.

### Introduction

Until 1992, policy for higher education in England and Wales was dominated by the existence of two sectors, with different institutions, organisational structures, purposes, traditions and cultures. In the ‘public sector’ were the polytechnics and colleges of higher education. The universities constituted the ‘autonomous’ sector. The division was deliberate. In 1965, a ‘binary policy’ was announced, to maintain, alongside the universities, the distinctive contribution of the local authority technical colleges to vocationally and professionally oriented higher education (Crosland 1965). The policy rejected a ‘ladder’ system in higher education and the historical tendency of institutions in the technical college tradition to aspire to university status, a phenomenon later called ‘academic drift’ (Pratt & Burgess 1974).

The 1992 Further and Higher Education Act abolished the binary divide, granting the polytechnics and some of the leading colleges of higher education the power to award their own degrees and the right to use the title ‘university’, and system-wide funding and quality assurance arrangements were established for the ‘unified’ system. It seemed that academic drift had triumphed, after all. The ‘new’ (post-1992) universities have now had

some seven years experience of life in the unified system. This article discusses the policy context of this change, and some of its implications for future.

## The historical context

1992 was not the first time that non-university institutions had acquired university status. In the preceding forty years, three generations of specially designated non-university institutions were established, and then changed into something else. In 1956, a White Paper (Ministry of Education 1956) had announced the establishment of eight (later 10) colleges of advanced technology (CATs). By 1963, the Robbins Committee (Robbins 1963) felt that they were so like universities that they should be upgraded to university status. This happened by 1966. It was partly in response to this that the government announced the binary policy in 1965, and in 1966 (DES 1966) proposed the designation of 28 (later 30) polytechnics to head the ‘public sector’ of higher education.

In 1972, a White Paper (DES 1972) set out plans for dramatic reductions in the intakes of students to colleges of education, and outlined ways in which the colleges might find new futures, by diversification and by amalgamation with other colleges, polytechnics or universities – or closure. By 1980, a new sector of nearly 60 ‘colleges of higher education’ had resulted from this process. Between 1989 and 1992, four colleges of higher education acquired polytechnic status so that 34 polytechnics, a few other colleges of education and their sister institutions in Scotland acquired university status in 1992.

It is hard to avoid concluding from this that history seemed to be repeating itself. And these are but the most recent in a longer series of similar events, stretching back into the last century, and in some cases, as in Manchester, the pattern was repeated several times (Robinson 1968). It is worth wondering if there are lessons from this history that might be learned about the possible development of the unified system.

## The CATs

The policy implied that by designating certain institutions, a number of outcomes would follow. ‘Advanced’ (higher education) level work was to be concentrated in the CATs (Ministry of Education 1956). Relatively simple tests of the policy showed the reverse was happening. Although the CATs increased their own proportions of advanced work, much of the overall growth of this took place elsewhere in the further education sector. There was more advanced work in the other colleges in 1964 than there had been in 1958 (Burgess & Pratt 1970: 54). And although the CATs had developed new degree level full time and sandwich Diploma in Technology courses, they had dropped much of their part time work.

In fact, the designation of the CATs reflected – and reinforced – a historical pattern of aspiration in further education, which itself reflected the social and economic context of the sector. One aspect of this was the way that further education acted as a route for students to remedy deficiencies or exclusion from other forms of education. In particular, the colleges had traditionally offered evening classes for working people (mostly men) to gain qualifications related to their trades or professions. The colleges sought to extend

this opportunity to degree level (and even doctoral level) by offering external university degrees (in the design and control of which they had little say). The CAT policy granted status to institutions that had predominantly degree level work. It resulted in the exclusion of the lower level courses that led to it, and the institutions were rewarded by university titles.

The study of the CATs also showed how government used few, if any, of the ‘instruments of policy’ available to it to counter the aspiration to the university model. It seemed simply to assume if you enunciated the policy, institutions would behave accordingly. Some of the instruments of policy it had used, like financial arrangements, whilst encouraging expansion of advanced work, had done so more effectively in the other colleges, rather than the CATs, not least because of the increased aspiration for status that the designation of the CATs offered to these colleges.

## The polytechnics

After its experience with the CATs, the government was anxious to avoid making the same mistakes again. The binary and polytechnic policies of the 1960s were intended to ‘reverse a hundred years of educational history’ (Pratt 1997: 15). The binary policy was a response to – and rebuttal of – the structural assumptions of the Robbins Report (1963) – and most of British society. Robbins had seen higher education as broadly synonymous with university education. His recommendations included not only awarding the CATs university status, but a succession of upgradings of the leading technical colleges as they developed advanced work.

By giving due recognition to the two traditions of the universities and the technical colleges, the binary policy was intended to stabilise the system, but differentiate between kinds of institution. The polytechnics would provide vocationally oriented degree courses, using the new Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) to validate them; they would meet the needs of thousands of young people for sub-degree courses and of ‘tens of thousands’ of part time students seeking advanced courses; they were to be ‘comprehensive academic communities’, under ‘social control’, and would offer economies of scale (DES 1966).

At first, the developments were not encouraging. The colleges which were to become polytechnics began to shed part time students (Pratt & Burgess 1974: 73); they began to increase the proportion of students aged 18–21 (Pratt & Burgess 1974: 79–81); proportionately fewer students were studying engineering (Pratt & Burgess 1974: 77) and their proportion of working class students appeared to be declining (Pratt & Burgess 1974: 86). All these developments flew in the face of the policy aim that they should be comprehensive academic communities.

The polytechnics began, eventually, to recover some of the lost ground. They maintained a comprehensive range of courses and nurtured significant educational developments. They established a wide range of vocational subjects as degree level study. They became identified with the development of flexible, modular courses. They sustained the part time route, after the initial decline in numbers. They had become identified as institutions for mature students and those without traditional entry qualifications. They became the larger sector in higher education, by expanding particularly rapidly (again

after years of sluggish growth) in the later 1980s. They became favoured by the government, particularly because the expansion has been achieved by reducing costs per student. I argued that they had made possible mass higher education in Britain (Pratt 1997: 307).

The major failure of policy – whether or not the acquisition of university titles is regarded as a mark of success (or even reward) – was in the arrangements for their governance. The polytechnics and local authorities were engaged in continual wrangles over institutional autonomy, eventually leading to the removal of the polytechnics from the local authority sector in 1988 as independent statutory corporations. They were funded centrally by a new Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council (PCFC). This made easy the changes of the 1992 Act (and thus an explicit failure of the 1960s policy aim) by eliminating the main administrative distinction between the two sectors.

### Unifying the system

There are differing accounts of the direct causes and intentions of the 1992 policy. Bird (1994) one of the senior civil servants in the education ministry reports that there was little ‘guiding philosophy’ in government policy for higher education in the 1980s. The expectation was that the polytechnics would eventually attain university status, but only after a period of consolidation under PCFC; Bird thought 1997 a more likely date for this than 1992. The apparent speed of the 1992 policy was explained by Price (1992) as a result of the support of the new Prime Minister, John Major. One suggested reason for this support was that Major was urgently seeking policies prior to the 1992 General Election to distinguish him from his predecessor Mrs. Thatcher, but which involved little cost and could be quickly implemented. The unification of higher education fitted those requirements.

Whatever the motivation of the government, the 1992 Act enabled the polytechnics and a few of the major colleges of higher education to change their title to university and to award their own degrees. (A corresponding act made similar provisions for Scotland). New higher education funding councils were established for England, Wales and Scotland, merging the functions of the PCFC and the Universities Funding Council. A new quality assurance body for the whole sector was established, extending some of the functions of the CNA in the public sector to the universities for the first time.

### Unification or stratification?

The situation in Britain now is of a ‘unified’ system of higher education, with policy seeking ‘diversity’ in mission between institutions of ostensibly equal status (DES 1991). The majority of higher education institutions are called universities, with full degree awarding powers, and only a small number of colleges are dependent on the universities for degree awarding powers. Does this mean that the historical pattern of aspiration and stratification in British higher education has, at last, been eliminated? The early indications are that longstanding differentials of status and resources are creating (or re-creating) the kind of stratified system that policy had so long sought to avoid.

For the ex-polytechnics, unification has had both advantages and drawbacks. In 1992,

the polytechnics had been so desperate to achieve university status that they pressed members of the House of Lords to vote for the 1992 Act regardless of detailed concerns (Pratt & Cocking 1999). They believed that the title 'polytechnic' disadvantaged them, particularly internationally. They were anxious to be free of the shackles of CNAA and to award their own degrees, and they believed that they could compete with the universities for resources in a competitive unified system of funding.

It is unlikely that any of the 'new universities' would wish to revert to their status as polytechnics, but their experience in the unified system has not been as agreeable as many seemed to have anticipated. In the allocation of resources, they have done badly. There are several reasons for this. Basking in their success of the later 1980s, when they had increased their share of higher education funds by expanding student numbers at reducing unit costs, they pressed for a unified funding system that rewarded 'efficient expansion'. But the policy and financial environment that they entered did not, in the event, favour them. They have not been able to increase resources by expanding at low cost. Some were already close to the physical limits of expansion. As they entered the unified system, the government restricted growth of numbers for financial reasons. Later, it abolished student grants and introduced tuition fees for undergraduate students, which appear to have dampened demand. In a time of competition for entrants, the low status ex-polytechnics have not fared well. Expansion, efficient or otherwise, was not a significant option. Then, against most expectations, the accounting system has not shown the ex-polytechnics to be cheaper at teaching than the old universities, so even when growth was possible, the funding mechanism did not favour them.

The polytechnics had always, with some justification, regarded with envy the universities' funding for research. Around a third of public funding for universities was for research. The polytechnics looked forward to commensurate increases in their funding as a result of their change of title. But since the mid 1980s, university funds for research have been allocated on an increasingly selective and competitive basis. A Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) is conducted every five years, to grade the quality of research in each subject area, and funds allocated in relation to the RAE rating. The ex-polytechnics first entered this exercise, at short notice, in 1992. In the RAE ratings and the allocation of research resources, they formed the lowest tier. (And the ex CATS formed the next lowest tier, demonstrating the resilience of historical differentials). The polytechnics gained only about 5 per cent additional research funding. A similar outcome occurred in the 1996 RAE. With few resources allocated for research when they were polytechnics, and with a limited research tradition, they have found it hard to score highly in the ratings.

This has presented something of a quandary for them. They cannot ignore the exercise, for this simply eliminates a potential source of funds. (One ex-polytechnic did so in 1992 but decided it was better to enter in 1996). Thus, the ex-polytechnics aspire to a research culture to gain additional resources. This has meant, paradoxically, that the impact of the funding methodology has been to encourage research in institutions with little previously, though its aim was to concentrate resources. For the ex-polytechnics, there has been no significant countervailing funding mechanism to support their traditional strengths, for example to encourage concentration on teaching. Nor has funding in the unified system for activities which might be thought to benefit the ex-

polytechnics been generous. The funds for a recently funding council initiative of 'widening participation' amount to only about a tenth of those allocated for research.

The quality assurance mechanisms for the unified sector have, equally, had disappointing outcomes for the ex-polytechnics. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education undertakes assessments of teaching quality in each subject area in institutions. But the ex-polytechnics – which might have expected success on the basis of their traditional concerns as predominantly teaching institutions – have not come out especially well. Traditional universities have often done better, suggesting that the new system-wide quality assurance process imposes uniform – and traditional university – values. Nor has the burden of bureaucracy in quality assurance been reduced under the new arrangements. It is quite common to hear staff in the former polytechnics commenting that the system is now worse than that of the CNAA that they had been so anxious to be rid of.

In terms of status, various league tables that all show the ex-polytechnics in the lower levels, because the criteria reflect traditional university ideals. Thus, the traditional universities still maintain their differential of resources and esteem, institutionalised through funding and other mechanisms and historic advantages in capital provision. The logic of the situation tempts the former polytechnics to emulate them, not to differentiate themselves. Moreover, they are less able to argue for their distinctive role and financial needs; arguments by a sub sector of a unified system carry less weight than when the polytechnics were a separate sector with its own funding council.

All these factors suggest that, instead of a diversity of mission of institutions of otherwise equal status, there is a danger of another kind of diversity. The diversity that has been created so far is mainly one of wealth, rather than of mission. Under financial stringency, the comparative advantage of the traditional universities with long established and more diverse funding streams has grown. Rustin (2000) argues that it is now increasingly hard to sustain the idea that university education is essentially the same in whichever university it is obtained. With the diversities of resources that exist in the British system, the position of the former polytechnics is one of 'double jeopardy'. They are at risk from both tougher regulatory systems and from intensified competition. Rustin argues that this position is not sustainable: he sees the end state of this situation as a rigidly stratified hierarchy of institutions, with prestigious research universities at the top, and impoverished (in terms of both resources and educationally), heavily managed, predominantly teaching institutions at the bottom. The selective allocation of research funds has already, in effect, identified a dozen or so 'research universities' and a larger number of mainly teaching institutions – the former polytechnics. Further informal stratification is seen in the various league tables, affecting the esteem and marketability of institutions. It is possible that the 'unification' of higher education is creating, after all, the 'ladder' system in higher education that the government in the 1960s was so anxious to avoid.

### Stratification or diversification?

One way out of this dilemma might be for the new universities to accept the challenge of 'diversity'. Drawing on Castells' (1996) analysis of the 'network society', Rustin (2000) argues that universities are becoming anomalous in their uniformity. Vocationally

oriented institutions cannot compete in the traditional hierarchy, nor is it likely that the hierarchical distinctions will be diminished, given the logic of the situation and the interest in sustaining the status quo of the already privileged institutions. Rustin argues that new universities could 'explore the possibilities of heightened difference'.

This is a high risk option, since it involves questioning the assumptions on which higher education is currently based and establishing new relationships between the university and society. Following Castells' ideas, Rustin suggests that a new university in a network society would establish direct relations with the full range of social institutions in its area – include businesses, government and voluntary and other organisations. It would seek interaction and exchange with them – of personnel and knowledge and experience. One function of universities in the 'knowledge society' (where as much knowledge generation and learning take place outside the academy as within it) is to offer a capacity for the consolidation and 'critical control' of professional and vocational knowledge (Pratt 1995). Their 'catchment' area for this exchange could be vast through the use of IT, and, paradoxically, this globalisation could heighten the value of direct local and regional links. My own University, for example seeks to be an internationally recognised centre of excellence in research and teaching on urban regeneration, based on its work in the east London area. It would be through the success in the local that the university would attain standing and status nationally and globally.

The emphasis on the geographically proximate would highlight the ex-polytechnics' traditional concern for the socially disadvantaged as most of them are located in or close to deprived urban areas. Their experience suggests that to successfully offer higher education to the hitherto disadvantaged requires a radical approach to curriculum and pedagogy. The programmes necessarily start from the students' learning needs and ambitions. The polytechnics developed a variety of devices – access courses, study skills support, modular structures, and more radically, independent study, all of which helped to do this, and future education for an increasingly diverse student population, engaged in lifelong learning, will require a substantial element in which the student is aware of and takes responsibility for his or her own academic development (see Pratt & Cocking 1999 for an example of this).

All this would have implications for policy and management both within and external to the university. The greater connection and mobility between the university and the wider society implies changes to governance, management styles, and to employment patterns in the university. The traditional, participative forms of academic self-governance do not easily lend themselves to an entrepreneurial and innovative institution. Nor does the more recent 'managerial' style, which treats professionals as employees in a line management hierarchy. Nor, too, do the many of the external imposed systems, for example, of quality assurance, financial control. A university cannot be responsive to local, social or economic requirements if it takes a year to validate a new programme or speculative activities cannot be funded. Staff will need to be able to leave and return to the academy, with support and job security, and others working outside will need similar opportunities to enter the university and then return to their normal working lives.

## Diversification and policy

In seeking to distinguish themselves along these lines, the new universities have, so far, had little support from government policy. Although the government is committed to a policy of diversity in higher education there is little in its policies to secure this. The White Paper advocating the changes of 1992 (DES 1991 for example) expressed a general concern to maintain 'diversity' of provision, and spoke of the need for funding arrangements related to the 'distinctive missions of individual institutions' and of the need to maintain and extend the polytechnics' and colleges' emphasis on vocational studies and widening access. Yet little in the funding mechanisms does this. The government does not appear to have learned the subtle lesson of history that policy instruments must be specifically supportive of specific policy aims.

If there are lessons from the experience of the polytechnics and the British system of higher education over the last fifty years and more, there are perhaps two of significance for the new universities. The first derives from the successes of the polytechnics, and it is of the need for the articulation of a distinctive educational philosophy that underpins the development – academic, governance, management and administration – of distinctive institutions. Although in the polytechnics, this philosophy was not universally shared, there were distinctive ideals (articulated for example by Robinson 1968) that guided their development and which they were anxious to preserve as universities (Pratt & Cocking 1999). The 1991 White Paper offered no educational philosophy, and even the Dearing Report (Dearing 1997), which proposed a vision of a 'learning society', did not develop this and largely carried on as if it had not, making few practical proposals to implement its vision.

The second lesson is that educational philosophy is not itself enough. As Pawson and Tilley (1997: 58) note, outcome depends on context. The polytechnics succeeded as polytechnics in a particular policy environment. The government has offered few clues as to how the polytechnic tradition might be developed now that the distinctive features of their policy environment have been removed. The evidence, so far, is that far from achieving a unified but diverse system, Britain is developing a stratified one. To achieve genuine diversification, both the new universities and the government will need to address a wide range of educational, organisational, financial and other policy issues.

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