

*Higher Education Quarterly*, 0951–5224

DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-2273.2011.00506.x

Volume 66, No. 1, January 2012, pp 106–122

# Higher Education as a System: The English Experience

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## Abstract

*With particular, although not exclusive, reference to England, this article 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. The central argument is that the structure of higher education is formed through the interaction of the state, market and higher education institutions and is, therefore, a shifting political construct. Furthermore, 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.*

## Introduction

The focus of this article, 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 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 higher education 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 higher education. 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 higher education 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 article moves beyond these approaches to argue that the key to researching structural change in higher education 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 higher education 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 higher education. 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)

This judgement was arrived at on the basis of his overview of an interesting mix of articles: policy documents, reflective statements from institutional leaders and analytical pieces from both academics and administrators. It is the contention of this article that the study of higher education also needs to develop a deeper conceptual approach to its research material. For example, with reference to Shattock's edited volume, it is pertinent to wonder why enhanced state steering within the context of expanding student numbers gave rise to a system of higher education.

Shattock's interpretation provides a contrast with that of the Robbins Report:

However well the country may have been served by the largely uncoordinated activities and initiatives of the past, we are clear that from now on these are not good enough. In what follows, therefore, we proceed throughout on the assumption that the needs of the present and still more of the future demand that there should be a system. (Committee on Higher Education, 1963, p. 5)

Thus, a system is needed because in the judgement of the Committee this is what the development of higher education required. However, in fairness to the Committee, the quotation was immediately preceded by a reference to the necessity of defining 'co-ordinating principles' and establishing 'a general conception of objectives', although there was no analysis of what these should be. This article argues for a conceptual approach that addresses issues of this order.

### **Territorial boundaries: system as a descriptive label**

Arguably a 'system' is no more than a convenient descriptive label used to identify institutions located within a defined territorial boundary. Thus there are regional boundaries (the higher education system in South-East Asia or Latin America), national boundaries (the British system of higher education), local boundaries (the German *länder* or the American state systems) and supranational boundaries (the European Higher Education Area). Boundaries may change: for example, it is perhaps more appropriate to think of national systems should the local boundaries no longer delineate distinctive characteristics. Thus, across the German *länder* and American states there has been a strong measure of institutional convergence with respect to publicly funded institutions, which has weakened the relevance of the state/*länder* boundaries (Fairweather, 2009; Kehm and Pasternack, 2009).

There are also those traditions of higher education that transcend national boundaries. The Humboldtian and Napoleonic ideas of the university, which between them have embraced much of continental Europe, present models of the university that incorporate clear values about the purposes of higher education and how they are to be achieved, which is what is required if a system is to be more than a territorial label. The comparative dimension inevitably raises the question of how other national models of higher education have evolved over time. While this is not a direct concern of this article it can be hypothesised that widespread developments such as the expansion of student numbers, coupled with a relative decline in public funding (the steady drift towards the privatisation of higher education), will have placed considerable pressures for change upon many national structures. With reference to continental Europe, the issue is how the Humboldtian and Napoleonic models have responded to those pressures.

It is dubious whether there ever was a British system of higher education given that the Scottish tradition has deviated in critical ways from the English model: wider social access, four-year degrees and broader

degree programmes (Davie, 1961, 1986; Caldwell, 2001; Keating, 2005). Moreover, contemporarily the British system of higher education has been further fragmented by the devolution of political responsibility for higher education policy accompanied by the emergence of national funding bodies for England, Scotland and Wales. In a recent edition of the *Times Higher Education* (THE) the Scottish minister with responsibility for education and lifelong learning raised the possibility of three-year degrees replacing some of the traditional four-year degree programmes (Fearn, 2010). Evidently, if there is a British system of higher education it is in flux and perhaps exhibiting internal convergence as well as divergence.

### Defining a system: what makes a system a system?

Implicit, therefore, in the argument is the proposition that the term system should be more than a convenient label with purely descriptive qualities. What is the dynamic that makes a system out of a collection of higher education institutions? Do the French universities and the *grandes écoles* form a French system of higher education? With reference to the United States, can the same be said of the Ivy League universities, the private liberal arts colleges along with those higher education institutions founded to promote particular religious values (to give but some variants of the American models)? Curris (2003) argued that the United States has a 'non-system' of higher education: the internal institutional differentiation (size, purposes, sources of funding, status) is so great that it would be a misnomer to label it as a system. Equally, was there ever a British system of higher education (or even of the universities) given the sharp contrasts between Scottish and English traditions? It is the shared traditions that define whether there is a system or not rather than the common use of the university label.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines 'system' as a:

Complex whole, set of connected things or parts, organised body of material or immaterial things; *the* established political or social order.

and:

Method, organisation, considered principles of procedure (principle of) classification; body of theory or practice pertaining to a particular form of government, religion, etc. . . .

The dictionary definition therefore focuses attention upon the idea of a system as a number of interconnected parts, and as encompassing a 'body of theory or practice' that shapes how those interconnected parts function.

In this context, the proposition is that a higher education system is the consequence of a changing relationship evolving out of state regulatory pressures, the demands and opportunities provided by the market and institutional (and increasingly stakeholder) behaviour. Given this, what are the precise system-defining values and practices that emerge out of the dynamic of this interactive process? How are those forces likely to change over time? In view of the shift in recent years from an élite university system to one of mass higher education, underwritten by somewhat contrasting values (universities as driven internally by narrowly defined academic interests in contrast to higher education as more responsive to values shaped by the state and the wider society), then one can expect the system-defining characteristics to have changed. However, what remains constant is the underlying dynamic in which the varying parties of state, market and the institutional sector struggle to control what the system is and how it functions (Tapper and Salter, 1978).

In the English system of higher education the regulatory apparatus established over time by the state has welded higher education institutions into a set of interconnected parts: institutions belonging to a system rather than sustaining themselves as self-generating organisations. Second, the universities (if not the complete range of higher education institutions) were a system because they embraced a 'body of theory *and* practice' that shaped how they functioned; it was the sharing of common values and practices that turned them into a system. The important question is how that 'body of theory and practice' *changed* over time and why.

#### *The role of the state and the intrusion of the market*

Post-1945 British higher education became one of those social goods for which the state steadily expanded its responsibility (indeed the Robbins Report suggested that there was almost a moral imperative to assume this role). Successive governments reinforced the state's authority and the state increasingly underwrote the provision of higher education, created and recreated the institutional framework that governed its own relationship to the universities and, over time as it developed its own idea of the university, steadily spelt out its policy goals. The presentation of the chronological account of this process of change has been undertaken in some depth (Berdahl, 1959; Owen, 1980; Carswell, 1985; Shinn, 1986; Salter and Tapper, 1994; Shattock, 1994; Kogan and Hanney, 2000). The task now is not to create yet another historically-focussed

analytical overview but rather to outline how the current regulatory régime defines system boundaries and steers institutional behaviour.

Until recently, the strongest argument that English universities constituted a system of higher education was the state's regulation not only of overall undergraduate student numbers but also of the constituent disciplinary boundaries: humanities, social sciences, pure and applied sciences. Moreover, the state underwrote, at a standardised rate per student, the fees of those students. However, the introduction of variable fees (following the passage of the *2004 Higher Education Act*) represented, on the surface, a significant shift away from state support for teaching costs. The implied logic was that a diminishing public financial input should have led to a declining role for the state in shaping the overall size and disciplinary boundaries of the student population. However, there remained the question of the cap on variable fees (initially set at £3,000 per annum) with almost all English universities charging £3,000 per annum for all courses. In effect the cap helped to maintain the idea that the English universities were part of one system, underwritten by the fact that their resources would not vary too greatly with respect to income per home-based undergraduate.

The current moves to raise the undergraduate fees ceiling to £9,000 per annum for home-based and EU students would appear to suggest that it will not be too long before there are marked differences of fee income between and within universities, which potentially would deal a considerable blow to the idea that English higher education is composed of equally regarded parts that share common goals. However, the introduction of the right to permit universities to charge fees is not unregulated. Besides the imposition of the cap, the state has created the Office for Fair Access that has regulated how the universities manage their variable fees régimes and has more regulatory functions now that fees of up to £9,000 are permitted. For those universities intending to charge over £6,000 per annum for a degree course there will be a particular obligation to ensure that steps are taken to broaden the social base of their student recruitment. However, the extent to which the Office for Fair Access will intrude into the admissions procedures of individual universities remains to be seen.

What these changes reflect is a restructuring of the relationship between the state, market forces and higher education institutions. Whereas control of student numbers and fees gave a dominant role to the state in the post-1945 model, in the wake of the raising of the fee cap to £9,000 there could emerge a model with more internal variation, within and between universities. Although most universities have opted to

charge fees at, or close to, £9,000 per annum, it remains to be seen how many will be able to sustain this in the light of government manoeuvring on the distribution of total home-based student numbers (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011) let alone the strength of the appeal of their courses to prospective students. Will some universities offer discounts for degree programmes that fail to attract the requisite student numbers?

The standardised funding model, which underwrote the state's input into undergraduate teaching, has run parallel to a competitive model that determines public financial support for other institutional goals. The most significant example of this is the public funding of university research of which the core element has been distributed on the basis of the periodic research assessment exercises. This is a straightforward state-regulated competitive market in which the state is the provider, with both the modes of assessment and the resource-distribution model determining the pattern of financial rewards. Less significant amounts of public funding underwrite various governmental policy initiatives, for example, the widening participation agenda (a social goal) and the promotion of 'good learning and teaching' (a desire to impact upon the pedagogical process).

It is almost impossible for British higher education institutions to escape the clutches of research assessment (the need to be perceived as a research-active university and the potentially large financial returns) but there is the possibility of adopting a more discretionary approach to the direct policy initiatives. All institutions will formally respond to them without necessarily making a sustained effort to pursue them actively. These policy initiatives are a classic example of the state promoting official policy goals through a strategy that offers incentives for compliance rather than sanctions for non-compliance (Filippakou *et al.*, 2010). It is indicative of a somewhat lax (or, some would say, more subtle) approach to boundary maintenance.

However, even if there is only token institutional compliance to state policy, should there be a persistent political will, then it is possible to exercise sustained pressure upon the universities if only to remind them of their membership of a system and the obligations this entails. For example, this can be illustrated by the current coalition government's linking of the raising of the fee cap to £9,000 to the widening participation agenda. The universities may be able to draw succour from the traditional value system that sustains their control of student access but there is persistent state pressure to require compliance with the widening participation agenda, which is underwritten by setting targets for broad-

ening social access, the monitoring of whether institutions meet their targets and the financial incentives available to those conforming to government policy. It is difficult, therefore, for even the most self-confident and resilient of institutions to ignore such pressure. While sustaining their control of the admissions process they have to make concessions to government policy, even though they may try to do so on their own terms.

In recent years, the greatest challenge to sustaining the idea of English higher education as a system has been the termination, sanctioned by the *1992 Further and Higher Education Act*, of the binary model of higher education coupled with the legally constructed emergence of a unitary model, which embraced the universities and polytechnics and steadily absorbed other higher education institutions; notably the colleges of higher education that offered mainly teacher-training programmes. Henceforth, there would be a higher education system apparently amalgamating different traditions, with individual institutions granted the right to acquire the university title. Over a period of time (for most a rather short period of time) institutions that prior to the 1992 Act had not been in the university sector went through the process of adopting the university title. However, it did not follow that the university title automatically transformed them into universities and nor did it necessarily mean that henceforth there would be one university system amalgamating different traditions of higher education. Indeed, it can be argued that the unitary model brought into sharper focus contrasting institutional identities.

The state has been able to impose forms of policy steering on all institutions that it is prepared to accept as universities. In effect the system is defined by the imposition of a uniform procedural framework regarding the state-market-institution relationship that embraces all of its members on the same formal terms. There is a common framework of rules, built up and modified over time by successive governments, which applies to all institutions offering higher education programmes. There are universal mechanisms that dictate student numbers, the formula funding of universities and government policy goals to which the institutions have to respond.

Within this comparatively new unitary model of higher education the most publicly controversial move to secure system cohesiveness has been the introduction of a state-regulated quality assurance régime, which is best exemplified by the political battles following the creation of the Quality Assurance Agency in 1995. The political manoeuvring, embracing both the initiation of, as well as major changes to, the character of the



régime has been dealt with elsewhere (Brennan and Shah, 2000; Brown, 2004; Harvey, 2005; Filippakou and Tapper, 2007). What was significant about this development was the introduction of procedures that embraced not only the whole domain of higher education but also challenged an important value embedded in the traditional idea of the English university. At a stroke there was the enhancement of an internally controlled model of accountability (best summed up as peer review dependent upon a network of external examiners) to one that was supplemented by central state regulation. Moreover, it was a model that appeared to owe more to practices embedded in the polytechnic legacy of higher education rather than to those traditions established in the university sector. After a protracted period of political struggle the model has abandoned periodic departmental inspections and is dependent upon institutional audit (although external examiners still retain a parallel role). However, the idea of central regulation under the auspices of the state remains in tact and, given its universal remit, is clearly important in defining English higher education as a system (with somewhat different regulatory values and practices prevailing in Scotland and Wales).

Through these means, the state created a system of higher education defined by the inclusion of the institutions of higher education within a regulatory framework that formally treated each of them on the same terms. In effect it was a system built around procedural uniformity and not a system of interconnected parts dependent on institutional interaction based on common values and practices (the coming together of the like-minded seeking mutual succour). The interconnectedness was the consequence of a common relationship to the various parts of the state apparatus that steered higher education.

#### *Institutional differentiation*

In a technical sense, therefore, it is no exaggeration to say that there is 'a highly structured, state run higher education system' (to quote Shattock again). However, the persuasiveness of this claim is limited by the fact that the procedurally defined system does not encompass component parts with equal resources. A *Times Higher Education Supplement* headline (*Times Higher Education Supplement* 13th July 2001), comparing the University of Cambridge with the then London Guildhall University (incorporated in 2002 with the University of North London to create London Metropolitan University) makes the point dramatically, perhaps over-dramatically: 'Cambridge is worth 170 Guildhalls'. Consequently, there are restrictions upon the state's ability to create a strong and secure

system of higher education. The state may have constructed a model in which its component parts have no choice but to interact with it through established channels but there are clear differences in the character of that interaction and, more importantly, the interconnected parts may have little, if any, direct contact with one another.

The widening participation agenda, the quality assurance régime and the research-assessment exercises all illustrate critically important fissures within the so-called system of English higher education each resulting in qualitatively different institutional relationships to the state's procedural regulations. If you are a university that usually recruits rather than selects student then you have a very weak market position with minimal control over the student selection process. Consequently, with respect to the widening participation agenda such universities have little choice but to embrace it, which puts them in a quite different relationship to the student market when compared to those universities where demand will exceed supply, often by a very significant margin.

It is instructive to reflect on why the resistance to the state-imposed quality agenda in the United Kingdom was led by the more prestigious universities, in particular those belonging to the 20-strong Russell Group (Macleod, 2001; Harvey, 2005; Tapper, 2007; Filippakou and Tapper, 2010). The instigation of the state-controlled quality agenda represented a challenge to the established values and practices of the traditional universities, as well imposing on them a bureaucratic burden. Furthermore, these universities, justifiably or otherwise, had established reputations supported by their rankings in a range of league tables. In effect they had an established position in the university hierarchy that might not be confirmed by the state-controlled quality régime. These universities had something to lose while others with less prestige had something to gain, which could be very important for them in obtaining additional revenue by recruiting overseas students or underwriting a bid to secure the funding needed to establish themselves as Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning.

In similar fashion, the uniform procedural structure of the research assessment exercises also interacts with embedded institutional differences. The amalgamation of the different traditions of higher education post-1992 created a system in which there were contrasting, albeit overlapping, historical relationships to research shaped by the careers of individual academics, the missions of their institutions and, should there be a research agenda, its focus and purpose. The first research assessment exercise was undertaken in 1986 with the explicit goal, backed by powerful figures within the academic community itself, that funding

needed to be concentrated if a quality research output were to be maximised. The post-1992 universities encountered an established system of values, a clear structure that determined what counted as research and how it was to be evaluated and, not surprisingly, what interests would be most dominant in the evaluative process. While this does not question the integrity of the individual assessment panels it does suggest that the process would have, and was intended to have, clearly defined unequal outputs as measured by the simple distribution of rankings and resources. This is not to deny that the procedural inclusiveness enhanced the research income of the new (post-1992) universities, or to deny that some of them could aspire to succour their 'pockets of excellence'. However, the pattern of outcomes was heavily prescribed by the values that were embedded in the resource distribution model. The blame (or, as many would argue, the credit) should not be placed upon the research assessment exercises *per se* because they simply reflected an approach to research evaluation underwritten by key components of the traditional model of British higher education.

#### *Divergence and convergence*

Thus, the uniform procedural boundary established by the state provokes an institutional response determined by a combination of the historical legacies of British higher education institutions and their contemporary individual market positions. In formal terms it is possible to argue that there is an English system of higher education but how meaningful is that alleged common body of theory and practice when the supposedly interconnected institutions are embedded within the system in such different ways? What kind of system is it if it is founded upon a procedural uniformity that purposefully encourages different institutional outcomes? Can it still be a system if the constituent elements, because of differing relationships to the state and the market, have to function on the basis of contrasting values and practices?

The divergences have been marked by very significant internal institutional boundary changes within the supposed system of British higher education. The most critical of these have been the creation of national funding bodies, which, significantly, are under local political control. Is there still a British system of higher education or are there different national systems within the United Kingdom? Or are there contrasting sectors within one system? Cutting across the national boundaries are the various groupings of universities, defined both by their status and the contrasting interests they have come to represent. There are different, if overlapping, segments of higher education (notably the Russell Group,

the 94 Group and the Million+ Universities), which leaves Universities UK and GuildHE as the umbrella organisations, which have the unenviable task of defining a consensus that embraces their varied membership. The only option for Universities UK and GuildHE is to pitch any apparent unanimity at a very general level by issuing broad policy statement with which no one within the sector could possibly disagree. For example, the need to sustain, or even augment, the commitment of public funding!

The emergence of the organised institutional interests (with rumoured subdivisions within them) makes it more difficult to sustain the idea of a university system. This development (with the Russell Group displaying the more complete organisational structure, including a research arm to assist in the formation of policy options) suggests a division of purposes with regard to the operation of the state-market-institution relationship and its outcomes. The very presence of different groups is indicative of contrasting institutional identities, which need to be promoted and defended by effective organisational action. Clearly, the individual university has a perception of its identity and an understanding of the alliances it requires to sustain its interests. There is also a fascinating element of status differentiation with the groups cutting across the recently created political boundaries (the Russell Group, for example, has 16 English institutions, 2 Scottish and 1 each from Wales and Northern Ireland). If there is still a system then it is a very different system from what it was but a short while ago.

The membership of the groups suggests a fragmentation that may in fact prove to be strong and durable: the sizes of the groups are comparatively small, they are composed of institutions that perceive themselves as having a shared identity and they are organisationally linked and consequently in a better position to construct common policy positions. Ironically, therefore, closer institutional interaction is occurring in the context of the formal emergence of separate sectors within British higher education: with status boundaries cutting across both the national and historical lines of demarcation (the collegiate universities, the civics, London colleges, the new universities of the 1960s) but with, excepting Universities UK, little shared membership of pre- and post-1992 institutions. So the relationship between the individual university and the procedural framework of the state has been supplemented by grassroots institutional links in part encouraged by government policy, for example, the research assessment exercises raise the question of how selectively the public support for research should be distributed. However, rather than reinforcing the system this leads to the emergence of a number of what

can best be described as sectors where the procedural ties to the state operate differentially because universities have contrasting market positions and underlying the groups is a self-identity based upon different 'values and practices' of higher education (reinforced by status and resource differentiation).

The rise of the different organisations points to the emergence of interests defined by status and designed to promote the cause of particular sectors rather than identify common, system-wide policy goals and values. The very current struggles that have surrounded the raising of the cap on variable fees illustrate the point perfectly, with the groups reflecting their market positions and the values that legitimise those positions. Of course, university leaders have always been obliged to protect their institutional interests but, increasingly, they do so within the context of a more competitive model of higher education most clearly illustrated by the growth of league tables, both national and international. There has been movement from a pyramid of prestige to a stratified model marked by competitive institutional positioning. What kind of system is this?

### **Conclusion: from system to flexible sectors?**

The article has shown how the changing relationship of the state, the market and higher education over the past twenty-five years has determined in what sense the English universities can be said to constitute a system. All the significant developments drawn upon in this article (the passage of the 1988, 1992 and 2004 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?

Even if the UGC, by determining the pattern of cuts, mitigated the damage done to the then university system, its action suggested, especially for those institutions receiving draconian cuts (for example, Aston and Salford), that they were below the salt—that they were marginal members of the university club. It is not surprising to find that subsequently both universities have been very successful in seeking private

funding, which has lessened not only their dependence upon the public purse but also has given them more room to manoeuvre in responding to public policy. Other universities have not been slow to learn the lesson.

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 higher education rather than a university system. This is a looser and more appropriate label, reinforced by the fact that in part the expansion of higher education has taken place in the colleges of further education, which leads to the possibility of describing all post-secondary education as belonging to the tertiary sector. If there ever was a university system in the United Kingdom 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. The central endeavour was to create a consensual funding mechanism that would allow universities to function effectively rather than to build a coherent system constructed out of a range of shared values. Over time, thanks to the expansion of the managerial ethos, institutional governance has converged (Tapper and Palfreyman, 2010) while the values and purposes of the universities have become more internally divergent and institutionally different.

When those institutional ties started to develop they did so through the identification of common political interests characterised by universities of roughly equal status that related to the state on much the same terms. Parallel to this development was the spread of more centralised structures of governance and management within the universities, including control over the organisation and development of their academic missions. In part, this was in response to direct pressure from the state but also because universities recognised the need to respond effectively to market opportunities if they were to do more than simply exist and survive (thus the rise of 'the entrepreneurial university' (Clark, 1998, 2004; Shattock, 2003, 2006)). This development reflected the recognition that the state was no longer a reliable source of public funding and that the universities needed to turn to the market to augment their resources. The consequence was the stratification of higher education (most clearly seen in the expansion of league tables) and its atomisation as individual universities competed with one another for market

resources, including those resources within the state's regulated market of which the highly competitive research assessment exercises provide the best illustration.

To return to the dictionary definition of a system, it would be difficult to characterise this as a model of interconnected parts underwritten by shared values and practices. However, this remains a potent legacy, which retains its appeal in certain quarters: for example, the assertion that all universities should embrace a symbiotic relationship between their teaching and their research as they pursue the task of transmitting and expanding knowledge. Nonetheless, not only is there increasing differentiation of the purposes of the universities, there is also growing fragmentation of the university itself; the age of the multiversity has arrived (Fallis, 2007) and the strategies of ensuring internal institutional coordination through bureaucracy, profession, politics and the market are in full flow (Clark, 1979). Perhaps there are no longer coherent universities, let alone a university system and, if so, the day of the post-modern model of higher education can be said to have arrived (Scott, 1995).

If the description of English higher education and, even more so, British higher education as a system is little more than a convenient, if misleading label, then can a more appropriate collective label be applied? This article has suggested that the fragmentation of British higher education 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. For example, the significant increase in student fees should enhance market forces, place considerable pressure upon the organised interests and make it even more difficult for the state to sustain any semblance of the idea that it is effectively steering a system of higher education. However, thanks to the activities of the Office for Fair Access, it may attempt to promote broadly defined policy goals.

An important area for further research and analysis is to explore more precisely what is the current structure of English higher education. However, what appears to have emerged is a political system of higher education 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 higher education: a model driven by shared values and practices and linked to state and society by equitable procedural arrangements. Moreover, comparative research is needed to see how other national systems have responded to parallel pressures for change. Do they retain distinctive national identities in which their institutions are embraced by a clear idea of the university or are they moving towards the English model with its differentiated sectors?

In this context a continuous academic endeavour is required to unravel conceptual meaning both as a worthwhile end in its own right and as an entrée into understanding the changing shape of higher education. Conceptual analysis acts as a bridge between empirical evidence and theoretical interpretation and, as such, represents the way forward for a higher education research agenda that attempts to construct a dialogue between theory and fieldwork.

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