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Was devolution the beginning of the end of the UK higher education system?

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Was devolution the beginning of the end of the UK higher education system?

Since 1998-99, when the Scottish Parliament, National Assembly for Wales and Northern Ireland Assembly were established, higher education (HE) policies appear to have diverged across the four 'home countries' of the UK. This divergence is most visible in the contrasting tuition-fee and student-support arrangements for students entering HE in 2012, and in the values and philosophies that underlie them.

Devolution, it would appear, has started a process which is inexorably leading the four HE systems of the UK to go their own separate ways. Or has it? In this article I suggest that the forces which keep the four systems together are at least as strong as those which pull them apart. There has been some divergence, and there will probably be more, but even this divergence has been constrained and shaped by the four systems' continuing interdependence. The UK dimension continues to be important.

This is one of a series of articles to mark the Golden Jubilee of the Association of University Administrators, reflecting on changes in HE and likely future changes. However, I take as my starting point not 1961, the date to which the AUA traces its history, but 1997, when the first issue of *perspectives* was published. The same year saw the publication of the Dearing Report (or series of reports) on *Higher Education in the Learning Society*, the election of a New Labour government and the decision to introduce tuition fees for full-time undergraduates. All three events had implications for the future of HE as a UK-wide system. The Dearing Report may have been the last major report on HE to cover the whole UK, although it appointed a separate Scottish Committee and several of its recommendations were informed by 'home international' comparisons of the UK systems. The government elected in 1997 was committed to parliamentary devolution for Scotland and Wales (subject to referenda) and it continued the peace process which restored a form of devolution to Northern Ireland. Tuition fees, introduced across the UK in 1998, quickly became the most visible aspects of policy divergence by the new devolved administrations. One of the first actions of the new Scottish administration was to set up the Cubie Committee whose recommendation to abolish up-front tuition fees was implemented in 2000. Policies continued to diverge during the 2000s. Scotland did not follow England when it introduced 'top-up' fees in 2006, and Wales introduced a grant for its own

domiciled students to balance the increase. At the time of writing, England is preparing to introduce a full-fee regime based on a philosophy which relies on markets to regulate supply and demand in HE. At the other extreme, Scotland has abolished all fees, including deferred contributions, for its domiciled full-time undergraduates, and it continues to base policy on a view of HE as a public good and an entitlement of citizenship. In between are Wales and Northern Ireland, which reject the market-led philosophy dominant in England but charge tuition fees, either maintaining fees at their previous levels (in Northern Ireland) or providing a grant for home-domiciled students to cover the fee increase (in Wales).

Of course, the parliamentary devolution of 1998-99 was not the beginning of the story. There was an earlier process of administrative devolution, notably in 1992 when the Scottish and Welsh Funding Councils were established, but with much earlier antecedents. Some sectors of HE, such as the former Scottish Central Institutions, have never been administered as part of a UK-wide system. (Indeed, the separate Funding Councils were set up, less to give expression to a desire for national self-determination, than as a bureaucratic by-product of the abolition of the binary line.) Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales had distinct histories and traditions of HE which, despite their integration into a UK system, are still reflected in such features as the four-year Honours degree in Scotland, the persistence of smaller institutions in Wales and the varying roles of Further Education colleges as providers of HE. Differences in the wider education system, and especially in secondary education, helped to sustain these distinctive features of HE. Scotland's four-year degree has traditionally complemented a broader upper-secondary curriculum and a tendency to leave school at a younger age. Scotland has its own system of school qualifications; Wales and Northern Ireland have their own awarding bodies and their own models of a National Curriculum.

Despite these long-standing differences, parliamentary devolution was widely expected to stimulate further policy divergence. One commentator describes devolution as a 'fragile divergence machine' and claims that '[t]he story of post-devolution politics in the UK is one of divergence' (Greer 2007, Greer and Jarman 2008). Most analysts offer a more nuanced version - devolution has encouraged divergence in some areas but not in others - but the emphasis is still on divergence.

Devolution, it is argued, has given the devolved governments both the power to pursue distinctive policies and the incentive for doing so. It has enabled distinct values, ideologies and traditions of HE to be expressed in current policy. It has fostered separate and distinctive policy communities, with different styles, processes and cultures of policy-making. It has allowed differences in the size, institutional structures and social and economic contexts of HE to be more fully reflected in policies. And it has done all this with remarkably few mechanisms for coordinating the different administrations' policies - in contrast to most other federal or quasi-federal systems (Jeffery 2006, Trench 2008).

The recent history of tuition fees seems to confirm the prediction of divergence. When the UK government introduced fees in 1998 these covered the whole UK; when it decided to raise fees from 2006 and again from 2012 the devolved administrations made their separate decisions. Another apparent symptom of divergence is the growing trend for students to study in their home country. Gareth Rees and colleagues make a useful distinction between HE as an *administrative system* - reflected in separate governance arrangements generating distinctive policies - and HE as a *social system* (Rees and Istance 1997, Rees and Taylor 2006). Under administrative devolution Welsh HE had developed as an increasingly distinct administrative system, but it remained part of an integrated social system of recruitment and participation which embraced both England and Wales. Parliamentary devolution may be changing this. Table 1, drawn from a current study of applications and entry to full-time undergraduate HE from 1996 to 2010, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, shows a clear trend towards studying in one's home country. This trend covered all four home countries, although their starting points were very different. Unsurprisingly, given the huge differences in the scale of the four systems, England (with around five-sixths of UK-domiciled students) had the smallest proportion of its domiciled students entering institutions elsewhere in the UK, although even this small proportion declined from 6% to 4% over the period. Rather more surprisingly, Scottish-domiciled students, who accounted for fewer than one in ten of the UK total, were hardly more likely than English students to enter institutions outside their home country. And in Scotland, too, the proportion who did so fell between 1996 and 2010, despite the fact that the number of places in Scottish institutions grew more slowly than in the other three countries.

[Table 1 about here]

Nearly two-thirds of entrants from Northern Ireland and Wales studied in their home country or territory in 2010, compared with little more than a half in 1996. In Northern Ireland this trend occurred mainly in the late 1990s when the number of places increased faster in Northern Ireland than elsewhere and the chronic under-supply of places relative to demand was eased, but by no means eliminated. More Northern Ireland students would have remained within the territory if enough places had been available (Osborne 2007). The shift towards study within Northern Ireland has been at the expense of Scottish rather than English institutions. In Wales the trend towards studying in Welsh institutions continued over the period and appears to have been more demand-driven.

Students who apply to and enter courses in another home country are more likely to be well-qualified, middle-class students seeking places at Russell Group universities. But there are many exceptions. A large number of less-qualified students leave Northern Ireland to study, often because entry requirements at home are too high, and post-1992 universities in England attract significant numbers of entrants from Wales and Northern Ireland. Ethnicity is also associated with mobility. Students from visible minorities domiciled in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales are more likely than their white peers to leave their home country in order to study; among English-domiciled students, those from ethnic minorities are more likely to remain in England.

The trend towards home-country study appears to be partly a product of devolution, or at least of the broader social and cultural changes of which devolution is a feature. Some of the more specific consequences of devolution - such as differences in fees and student support - have clearly had an impact. These differences have been greatest in respect of Scottish-domiciled students, for whom the difference in the costs of entering Scottish and non-Scottish institutions has progressively widened since 1999. The same has been true for Welsh students, but only from 2007-09, when the increase in 'top-up' fees was covered by an additional grant paid only to those entering Welsh institutions. This raised the proportion of Welsh students who studied in Wales to 70% in 2008; in 2010, when the grant was withdrawn, this fell back to the

65% shown in Table 1, but still much higher than before parliamentary devolution. Under the new fee regimes introduced in 2012 only Scottish and Northern Ireland-domiciled students have an incentive in the form of differential fees to study in their home territory. Possibly the main impact of the fee rises is to encourage even more students to study close to home to save costs. This trend has been apparent throughout the period of our study, and it has contributed to the growth in home-country study, but it does not explain it all. The ‘home country’ effect has been stronger than the ‘regional’ effect within England.

Whatever the explanation, it might seem that by 2010 the four UK systems were acquiring distinctive characteristics as administrative systems, were developing divergent policies, and were well on the way to becoming discrete ‘social systems’ of HE as defined by Rees, Istance and Taylor. HE as a UK-wide system might indeed appear to be breaking up. However, these headline stories mask a more complicated pattern.

In the first place, with the exception of fees for full-time undergraduate students there is rather little evidence that HE policies across the UK are, in fact, diverging. Reading policy documents from the four administrations one is struck by the similarity of the language and of much of the content. The policies described are often very similar and, when they differ, the differences often reflect programme divergence (packaging similar measures in different ways) rather than divergence in matters of broad principle or strategy. Policies for such issues as widening participation, fair admissions, research selectivity and graduate employability have tended to develop in parallel, if not to converge. A recent analysis of the four systems’ HE policies since devolution concluded: ‘Rather than a long-term “divergence machine”, parliamentary devolution seems to have introduced a fluctuating and complex pattern in which the balance of divergence and convergence has varied over time, across specific policy issues and according to the particular countries that are compared. And across large areas of policy the more important trend is the continued similarity of policies, despite differences of detail, and the constraints on divergence.’ (Gallacher and Raffe 2011, p.15)

One reason for this is that the policy processes in the four countries are far from independent of each other, despite the weakness of formal mechanisms for coordination. The devolved governments do not control all the levers of power over HE. Immigration, some aspects of employment policy and science are reserved areas. The cliché that education policy is largely made in the Treasury is still valid. The devolved administrations' budgets are based on English budgets and therefore on English policies. They do not have to adopt English policies, but to the extent that their policies assume a different pattern of cost-sharing and a different level of public funding of HE they must make up the difference from their other budgets.

HE policy communities tend to be UK-wide. Representative organisations for university leaders, staff, students, administrators and so on tend to be British or UK-wide, even if they have branches or federated organisations at a 'national' level. So are most organisations with a pedagogical, professional, research or disciplinary focus. UK-wide policy communities tend to engage in policy discourses that are also UK-wide or, often, global. Although devolution has encouraged more networking and collection action within Scottish or Welsh HE, this complements rather than replaces the UK and global dimension; specific agendas may vary across the home countries but the language of the debates varies much less. These wider policy discourses sustain common values and priorities, and tacitly endorse a single view of the nature and mission of a university, reinforced by world rankings and concepts such as the 'world class university'. Within the UK, common values and priorities are further reinforced by the continued publication of UK-wide statistics and indicators, setting benchmarks and common standards by which the home countries' performance can be compared.

In other words, many of the 'globalising' processes which are alleged to encourage some forms of convergence among HE systems across the world are reflected in processes within the UK. The Bologna process may have had less initial impact on HE in the UK than in many other countries, but its influence is increasing and it is a further source of convergence, or of constraints on divergence. Moreover, increased global competition has encouraged joint UK-wide action in areas such as research assessment and funding, infrastructural support and student admissions, and in the development of a 'UK brand' to promote UK HE internationally. This has at least the

tacit supported of the devolved administrations. Despite their desire to increase control of their domestic economies, and their support for the rhetoric of the knowledge economy, there have been few calls for the devolution of science policy or for repatriating the functions of the Research Councils.

These areas of collaborative action illustrate the continued interdependence of the four HE systems. For further examples we revisit the data on student flows presented in Table 1 above. These seemed to show the four systems becoming increasingly self-contained, and therefore less interdependent. However, Table 1 tells only part of the story. In the first place it is restricted to full-time undergraduates. It excludes part-time students (who are more likely to study in their home country) and postgraduates (who are less likely to do so). Other types of mobility, such as among academic staff, also involve substantial cross-border movement. Second, Table 1 shows outflow data: the destinations of students from each country of domicile. Table 2 presents the same data in ‘inflow’ format: where do students entering institutions in each country come from? To maintain comparability with Table 1 it is restricted to UK-domiciled students. (EU and overseas students accounted for 9% of all entrants through UCAS in 1996, and for 14% in Northern Ireland, where they included a large inflow from the Republic which declined when fees were introduced in the UK and abolished in the Republic. In 2010 EU and overseas students accounted for 13% of entrants, with the highest proportion (17%) now in Scotland.)

[Table 2 about here]

England, because of its scale, once again appears to be relatively unaffected by the other countries of the UK (indeed, in 2010 entrants to English institutions from the rest of the UK were outnumbered more than 3 to 1 by entrants from outside the UK). Northern Ireland also received few entrants from the rest of the UK, who were again greatly outnumbered by non-UK entrants. Wales, on the other hand, appears more exposed in this table; whereas Table 1 showed that little more than a third of Welsh students studied outside Wales, Table 2 shows that nearly half of entrants to Welsh institutions were from outside Wales (and more than half if non-UK entrants are included). Scotland, which appeared relatively detached from the rest of the UK in our outflow analysis, now appears somewhat less so. As we saw in Table 1, in 2010 only 6% of Scottish entrants joined institutions in the rest of the UK, but Table 2

shows that 13% of UK-domiciled entrants to Scottish institutions were from outside Scotland. Further analyses of the UCAS data show that if we shift the focus from entrants to applications this number increases again: 25% of UK applications to Scottish institutions were from the rest of the UK. And it increases even further if we focus on those institutions which may be expected to have most influence on HE policies, especially those designed to nurture and sustain ‘world-class universities’; 42% of UK applications to Scottish Russell Group universities in 2010 were from applicants domiciled elsewhere in the UK.

So even Scotland, which appeared in the outflow analysis as the most self-contained of the devolved HE systems, actually receives substantial numbers of applications from the rest of the UK. And the continued interdependence of the four systems - or at least, the dependence of the three devolved systems on England - will continue to constrain policies and to shape the evolving ‘social systems’ of HE. The important lesson from the history of fees policies since 1999 is not that the devolved administrations have been free to develop their own policies, but rather that in doing so they are constrained at every step by decisions taken in respect of England. They are constrained by cuts in funding for English HE and by the formulae which cut their own budgets in line with these. They are constrained by the UK-wide competition for staff, for research funding and for other resources, and by the consequent need to maintain parity of funding with their UK competitors and avoid a ‘funding gap’. And they are constrained by the UK-wide nature of student markets, which means that their own policies for student fees and support have to protect both their own students and their own institutions from undesirable fluctuations in cross-border flows.

So, despite the opportunities for divergence provided by devolution, two sets of factors prevent the UK systems from drifting far apart. First, the formal and informal processes of policy-making are intertwined, generating common agendas and shared repertoires of policy responses. There will continue to be differences in policy and practice that reflect the different needs and circumstances of the four countries - as there were before parliamentary devolution - but this is more a matter of parallel movement than of divergence. Second, the continued interdependence of the four systems, further increased by the pressures of globalisation and internationalisation, mean that HE policies, as well as the social systems of HE in the four countries,

continue to be closely related. This does not necessarily mean that the systems will never diverge, as the recent history of tuition fees and student support illustrates, but it does mean that the extent and nature of this divergence is severely constrained.

Two academic literatures help us to make sense of the changing relationships among the UK systems of HE. The first is the literature on devolution, with its interest in divergence; the second is the literature on globalisation with its interest in convergence. Both tend to stress the variable nature of the relationship. That is, the literature on devolution draws attention to the contingent and variable character of policy divergence, whereas the literature on globalisation stresses the limits to convergence, the local mediation of global policies and the reassertion of local identities as a counter to global homogenisation. However, two themes from the literature on globalisation are particularly relevant to understanding the impact of devolution on HE in the UK. The first is *transformation*. Devolution has not significantly weakened the links between the four UK systems, but it has changed their nature. The second is *dependence*. Despite the growing formal autonomy of the devolved HE systems, in many policy areas decisions taken in respect of England severely constrain their choices. England is the elephant in the room of the devolved HE systems. The question arises, can we avoid the risk that the elephant will roll over and flatten its neighbours if we persist with formal structures that pretend it is not there?

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Table 1. Percent entering higher education institutions in each home country of the UK, by country of domicile: 1996 and 2010

		Location of institution				All	N (=100%)
		England	Wales	Northern Ireland	Scotland		
Domicile							
1996	England	94	4	*	2	100	216676
	Wales	45	54	*	1	100	13213
	Northern Ireland	24	1	56	18	100	8958
	Scotland	8	*	*	92	100	24088
	All	81	6	2	11	100	262935
2010	England	96	3	*	1	100	338955
	Wales	34	65	*	1	100	18150
	Northern Ireland	25	1	66	8	100	13419
	Scotland	5	*	*	94	100	32091
	All	83	6	2	9	100	402615

Note: The Table is based on UCAS data. It covers accepted applications made by UK-domiciled applicants through UCAS to full-time undergraduate courses in HE institutions. Figures may differ slightly from those based on other definitions or other sources. * indicates less than 0.5.

Table 2. Home countries of domicile of entrants to higher education institutions in each home country of the UK: 1996 and 2010

		Location of institution				
		England	Wales	Northern Ireland	Scotland	All
Domicile						
1996	England	95	54	2	15	82
	Wales	3	45	*	*	5
	Northern Ireland	1	1	97	6	3
	Scotland	1	*	*	79	9
	All	100	100	100	100	100
	N (=100%)	213653	15904	5177	28201	262935
2010	England	97	46	2	10	84
	Wales	2	53	*	*	5
	Northern Ireland	1	1	97	3	3
	Scotland	1	*	*	87	8
	All	100	100	100	100	100
	N (=100%)	335998	22515	9088	35014	402615

Note: See note to Table 1.