

ANGLICISING SCOTLAND: UNIVERSITY ADMISSIONS

David McCrone

Few issues are calculated to arouse more emotion in Scotland than an attack on its education system. Scots guard jealously what they regard as their heritage, one of the few remaining distinctive institutions which sets them off from their more powerful southern neighbour. Scottish universities have tended to attract potent mythology about their content and their appeal. The 'democratic myth' – myth in the sense that it marks a sacred, self-evident belief, rather than falsehood – is deeply embedded in Scottish culture, and helps to convince Scots that their education system is more open, more democratic, and of course, superior, to the English system. Such a myth comes with its own persona – the lad o' pairts – the one (never a woman) who has the brains but not the means to go to university from the parish school. This is a myth made of rural or small town life in days gone by, but which survives in a weakened, modern form in the face of the accessibility of education to those with talent, and above all, of education for its own sake.

In this context, the composition of students at Scotland's universities has long been a sensitive one. In 1987/8, there were 41,600 undergraduates at Scottish universities, representing 10% of all undergraduates at UK universities, and 6800 post-graduates (10% of all UK postgraduates) (Scottish Education Department⁽¹⁾). Scotland has 10 of the UK's 45 universities, providing three year general or honours degrees, as well as four year honours degrees. The need to defend the three year undergraduate degree against a government seeking to reduce its version of 'cost-effectiveness' on higher education has become increasingly explicit. The cuts in expenditure imposed on the universities in the 1980s had a disproportional effect on Scotland, given its share of resources. In the face of a continuing squeeze on the system, coupled with the threat of privatisation, student vouchers and loans, have raised the political salience of higher education generally.

By the 1980s, the issue of the 'englishing' of the Scottish universities had attracted media attention. At St Andrews in the 1970s, for example, there had been a controversy about high failure rates among Scottish students (or, rather, those with Highers). It was claimed that the density of non-Scots (by the late 1970s, over 50% of the undergraduate population, that courses were being taught to a higher standard, thereby disadvantaging Scots with Highers. Early

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controversy broke at Edinburgh University at which it was claimed that preference was being given to non-Scots, to A-level candidates. University authorities at both universities denied the claims of 'bias', and pointed out that the increase in non-Scots was not confined to these two institutions, nor was the explanation straightforward. Nevertheless, the universities were placed on the defensive in the context of wider political and cultural debates about Scotland's distinctiveness. The claim that Scotland's universities were being threatened fitted the general expectations in a country which had non-Scottish solutions to policy matters imposed since 1979. There is, too, an older controversy about the 'englishing' of the content of Scottish education, an issue which was articulated by George Davie in his influential book *The Democratic Intellect*⁽²⁾ published in 1961. Davie's treatise that the Scottish general curriculum with its grounding in philosophy in particular had been squeezed out over the last century by specialisation at honours level has been a powerful and lasting critique of Scottish education. His anglicisation thesis has largely been taken as read, despite some doubts about the evidence for his claim⁽³⁾. Nevertheless, the Davie thesis provided a ready-made context for the controversy in the 1980s about non-Scots entrants to Scottish universities. What gave it particular piquancy was the suggestion that the Scottish universities themselves were encouraging the trend, and ultimately eroding Scottish distinctiveness by their own actions.

Nineteen Eighty Eight saw the 'englishing' thesis extended further. Changes in Scottish universities were set in a broader context, and a series of Scottish institutions – the Arts, in particular – were challenged as selling Scotland short. Indeed, the series of articles in this volume reflects that 'englishing' is an issue of current concern in Scotland. Scottish Television ran an hour-long programme at prime time in the Autumn of 1988, spelling out this 'englishing' process. Coupled with radical shifts in government policy to impose Thatcherite solutions on the country, it seemed to many self-evident that what was happening to Scottish education was simply one manifestation of a policy to diminish Scottish content and personnel. Later in the year, the Educational Institute of Scotland ran a campaign against government policy under the banner of defending Scotland's heritage against 'englishing'. What is striking about these campaigns, however, is not that they highlight new concerns, but that they mobilise under this essentially 'nationalist' banner. As Tom Nairn⁽⁴⁾ pointed out, complaints about the englishing of Scotland's universities are not new at all; indeed, folk have ginned about it for long enough. What is different is that the issue has been inserted into the political agenda in a novel way. It reflects growing nationalist sentiment throughout the 1980s.

While it is perfectly proper that issues are contextualised and interpreted as parts of a more general political process, we have to be careful that we understand precisely what is happening. The issue of anglicising Scottish universities has many angles, in a manner of speaking –

the composition of the student body, the origins of teaching and research staff, the content of courses and degrees offered. There has been a noticeable tendency to take the evidence for granted. Those opposed to 'englishing' tend to need little convincing that it is happening; those who approve of it (or, at least, see it as inevitable) don't feel it is necessary to examine the evidence either way. What this chapter will do is examine in detail the evidence that Scotland's universities are admitting more non-Scottish undergraduates; and if they are, to review the explanations for the trend.

This chapter will base its analysis on published sources, with all the assumptions and restrictions these contain. These data define 'Scots' and 'non-Scots' in terms of domicile, that is, in terms of the student's home address. Clearly, in an ideal world this definition would have to be broadened. How many non-Scots, for example, are born of Scottish parents who have sent their offspring back to the home country for education? We do not know. Nevertheless, insofar as we are interested in a trend over time for the proportion of non-Scots to increase, it is difficult to see how *more* Scottish parents are sending their children to Scottish universities than before.

Similarly, much of the controversy centres, not on domicile as such, but on Highers versus A-levels, for which 'Scots' and 'non-Scots' have become crude proxies. While non-Scots are in essence A-level candidates, some Scots may take these GCE examinations at school or Further Education college. As such, domicile is by no means a perfect indicator of qualification. While it may seem that 'non-Scots' is a fairly unproblematic concept, it is a residual term, including not simply the English, but the Northern Irish, and the Welsh, as well as students from overseas. Further, in the context of the public controversy, the epithet 'English' seems not simply to refer to those born south of the border, but evokes a particular type of the species – essentially male, public-school educated, and southern. Women, for example, from English Comprehensive schools in Bolton and Barrow have escaped opprobrium. 'English', in other words, acts as a shorthand description for a particular set of social and cultural characteristics. None of these nuances can, of course, be captured from an analysis of domicile statistics, but that is where we must begin.

Undergraduate Entrants

The Scottish Education Department (SED) issued Statistical Bulletins on University students in December 1987 (data relate to session 1985/86), and in April 1989 (1987/8 data)⁽⁵⁾. The latest bulletin provided the following data:

Full-time Undergraduates at UK Universities 1987/88

		Scotland	Domicile Other UK	Overseas	All
Location of University	Scotland	28320	9670	3590	41580
	Other UK	2450	200960	19810	223220
Total UK		30780	210630	23390	264800

Source: SED Statistical Bulletin No. 3/H1/599X Table 1.

Two important conclusions can be made at this stage: First, of the 41580 students at Scottish universities, 68% are domiciled in Scotland ('Scots', if you prefer). Second, out of over 30,780 Scots at university in the UK, 92% attend Scottish universities. In other words, more than 9 out of 10 Scots students attend one of their national universities; at the same time, just over one-third of students at Scottish universities are not domiciled in Scotland.

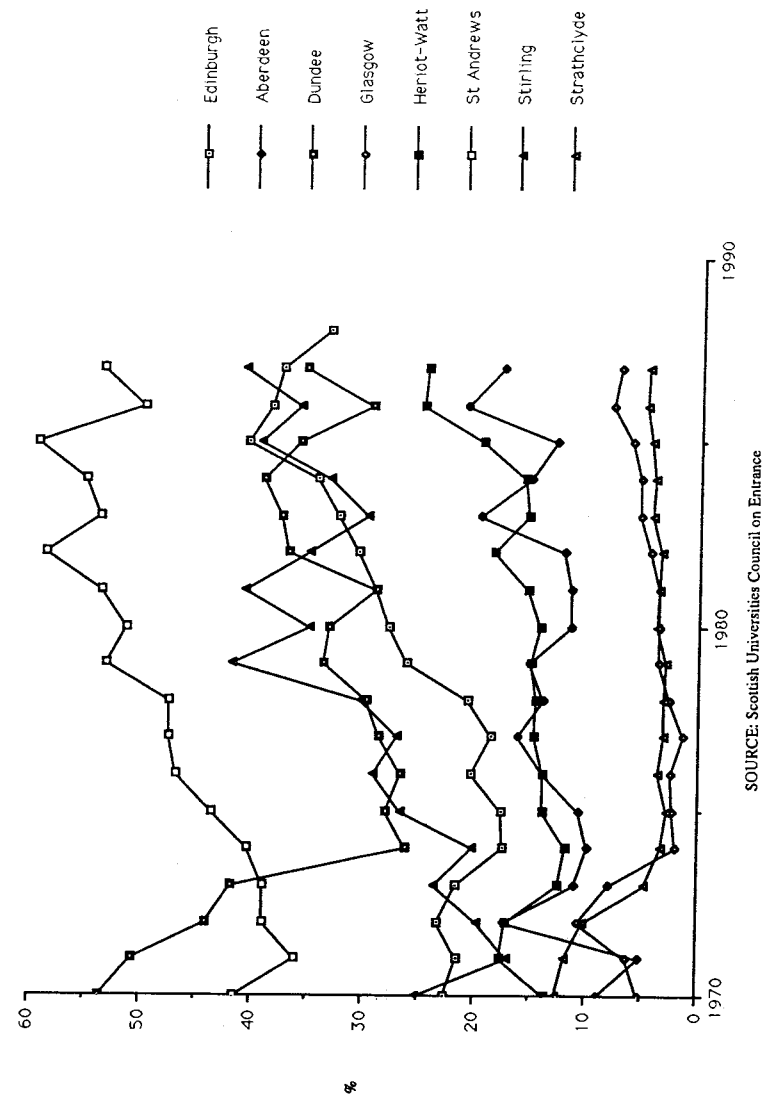
The SED Bulletin also points out that since 1980, Scots domiciled entrants to Scottish universities showed a net decrease of 11%, whereas entrants from elsewhere in the UK and from overseas increased by 25% and 88% respectively. While the most recent years of 1986/7 and 1987/88 showed a 4% increase in Scots entrants, greater than those from elsewhere, the 1980s trend does confirm a long-term increase in non-Scots. In 1980 76% of full-time undergraduates at Scottish universities were domiciled in Scotland; by 1987/8 it had fallen to 68%.

The distribution of non-Scots at Scottish universities is, further, not even. There is a marked variation between the universities, with St Andrews having only a third of its undergraduates Scottish, while the west-coast universities of Glasgow and Strathclyde are overwhelmingly Scottish (at 85% and 87% respectively). Aberdeen, and the west-coast universities have above average Scottish undergraduate populations; St Andrews, Dundee, Stirling and Edinburgh, the highest proportion of non-Scots.

Data from the Scottish Universities Council on Entrance⁽⁶⁾ allow us to examine trends in the longer term, from 1970 until 1987. These data, however, are in terms of 'entrants', those coming to university for the first time, rather than in terms of the undergraduate population as a whole which the SED's data are concerned with.

The data show that, by the middle of the 1980s, distinct clusters had emerged. In terms of the proportion of non-Scots in the undergraduate population, St Andrews was untypical of the others; that Glasgow and Strathclyde were the most 'Scottish' in these terms; and that the other universities were clustered in the middle, with Stirling, Dundee and Edinburgh having disproportionately more non-Scots. Nevertheless, the

FIGURE 1: PERCENTAGE OF NON-SCOTS ENTRANTS (UK RESIDENTS) AT SCOTTISH UNIVERSITIES



SOURCE: Scottish Universities Council on Entrance

trend lines are by no means uniform. If we take 1970 as our benchmark, then, perhaps surprisingly, Dundee and not St Andrews had the highest percentage of non-Scots, reflecting in part its historic links with that institution. The year-on-year fluctuations are considerable, and serve to counsel caution in taking any year as typical. Nevertheless, Glasgow and Strathclyde show remarkable consistency in recent years, and, if anything, now admit fewer non-Scots than they did in the early 1970s. Edinburgh University seems to have the steepest increase in non-Scots, rising from around 20% in the 1970s to a peak of 40% in 1985, before falling back in the three successive years to 35% in 1988.

In general terms, then, there has been an increase in the non-Scots component of the undergraduate population in Scotland's universities. How are we to explain it?

Explaining 'Anglicisation'

In the context of the controversy over the increase in non-Scots at Edinburgh (based, incidentally, on 1985 figures), one favourite explanation was simply 'conspiracy', that the institution through its admissions officers preferred 'English' students. This explanation carried a rider which sought to explain this preference, namely, that admissions officers were biased in favour of people 'like themselves' – white, middle class, privately educated, and male. Conspiracy theories have a simplicity which often contain an element of truth, and ought not to be discarded without examination. Their attraction is that they purport to explain in a fairly straightforward way complex phenomena. Nevertheless, as a form of social explanation they tend to be fairly primitive, and so it proves here.

In terms of university admissions, the case for a conspiracy rests on the view that universities 'select' those who come. Obviously, that is true insofar as those who do not receive offers of a place do not come, but it is not possible to say that those who embark on undergraduate degrees in the October of each academic year are preferred. The selection procedure is far more complicated, relying as much on student self-selection as on that by admissions officers. For example, over 16,000 applied for places at Edinburgh University in 1988 and only 2376 were admitted. Does this mean that nearly 14,000 were rejected by Edinburgh? No. A simplified diagram might help to make clear how 'applicants' become 'entrants'.

At the first stage, admissions officers will reject a number of applicants outright because they do not meet the minimum qualification levels for courses, nor is there any likelihood that they will be able to either on resits or in a 6th year diet of examinations. The rest are either made 'conditional' offers (a place is offered on condition that certain levels are attained in examinations still to be sat), or 'unconditional' offers (made to applicants whose examination performance is already satisfactory, usually in 5th year

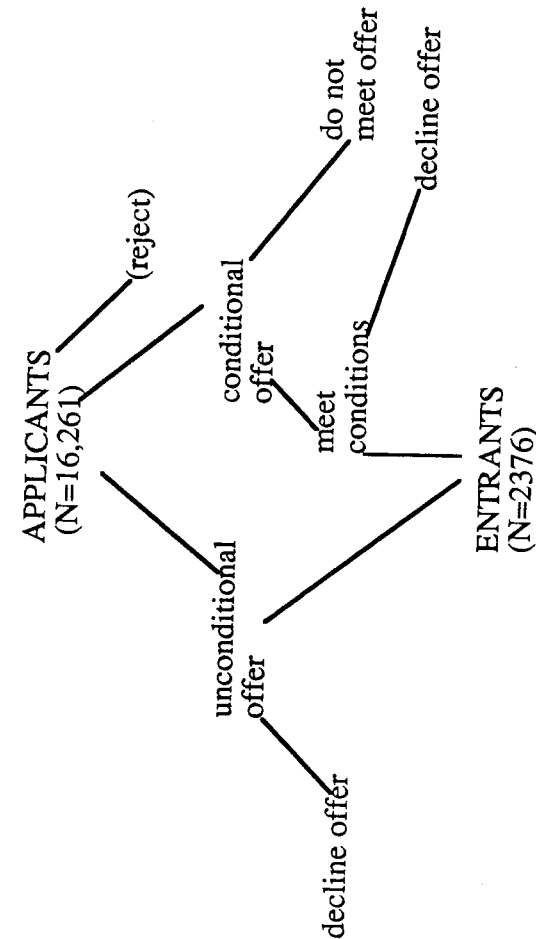


FIGURE 2: EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY, UNDERGRADUATE ENTRY IN 1988

Highers). At this stage, applicants who have received an offer of a university place may hold a number of offers from other universities, will select one offer, and turn down the others. Similarly, those holding conditional offers may do likewise (especially if one institution chooses to make them an unconditional offer). Hence, a number of applicants may themselves decide not to take up an offer, and go elsewhere. At this stage, applicants indulge in self-selection, while those who do not meet the conditions made in an offer exclude themselves. In this way, 'selection' is carried out as much by candidates themselves, as by academic selectors. Indeed, admissions officers are often reduced to crossing their fingers and touching wood in the hope that roughly the 'right' number of entrants will come forward from the appropriate number of offers made, especially when universities are working with entry targets set by government with very little room for manoeuvre. Admissions will always be an inexact science because much depends on student selection which is itself dependent on what the 'market' for higher education places (colleges, polytechnics as well as universities) looks like. In this complex decision-making process, the room for 'conspiracy' to operate is very limited.

One of the problems with the 'conspiracy' theory is that it tends to ignore the rapidly changing environment in which universities find themselves, and over which they have little control. Since 1981 when major cuts were made in university budgets, and subsequently followed by a series of financial restrictions throughout the decade, universities have not been masters of their own fates. It would be distinctly odd to argue that just at the time universities are losing the little autonomy they have vis-a-vis central government, they have more power to make major shifts in the composition of the student body. In this respect, universities have been on the receiving end of political decisions, demographic changes and policy outcomes which in large part determine the composition of the student body. Universities, any more than schools, are not masters of their own houses. Nevertheless, this important factor does not of itself explain why there is such a variation *between* the Scottish universities in terms of student domicile.

Before considering this point, however, it is necessary to outline why there should have been such a surge in applications from non-Scots to Scottish universities. The key to this understanding lies in the fateful year 1980/1 when universities felt the wintry blast of financial cuts. At the same time as cutbacks were taking place in universities numbers (universities could be fined by the Treasury if they exceeded limits of numbers), the non-university public sector of higher education in Scotland was expanding. Analysis carried out by the Centre of Educational Sociology at Edinburgh University⁽⁷⁾ shows that while the percentage of young Scots with entrance qualifications entering Scottish universities actually fell from 8.9% in 1980/1 to 7.7% in 1983/4, so the percentage going into public-sector higher education actually rose from 7.8% to 9.6% over this period. In other

words, the public sector (the Central Institutions, Colleges and the like) took a higher percentage of the qualified intake. This research shows too that there was no shortage of qualified school leavers, which might on the face of it seem to account for the displacement away from university to public-sector higher education. Whereas 82% of those with 6 or more Higher passes enrolled for a university degree in 1980, by 1986 the figure was a mere 64% (those with 5 Highers showed a similar fall – from 66% to 52%). We cannot conclude, therefore, that the number of suitably qualified applicants has fallen; precisely the reverse.

Before 1980, the picture was one of rising levels of participation in all sectors of higher education. The cuts of 1980/1 seem to have had a dramatic and sudden effect in making university education that much harder to achieve. To apply a simple model of supply and demand, just as the demand for university education was reaching new levels in terms of the number of well qualified candidates, the supply of places at universities was suddenly reduced, meaning that the qualifications applicants needed to get in – the 'going rate' – rose significantly. It is little wonder, then, that many applicants even well-qualified ones realigned their sights on non-university degree and other courses, especially given the context of high unemployment among young people in the early eighties. If it was much more difficult to get into university, and also to get a job at that time, then it is not difficult to see the attractions of the public-sector, especially of 'vocational' courses, for qualified school leavers. In general terms, then, the changing opportunities in higher education have not kept pace with the flow of well-qualified school leavers in Scotland.

The question remains, however. Surely these restrictions have been placed on higher education outwith Scotland too? This is true, but their impact on Scotland has been greater given the historically different mix of higher education north of the border. Scotland has, as we have seen, provided much more than its per capita share of all UK university education, and therefore will be harder hit by restrictions placed on this sector. Second, the participation rate of young people (in the 17 to 19 age group) in higher education is greater than south of the border, and thirdly, the fall in the birth-cohort size – demographic decline – seems to be greater in Scotland. Given the size differential in population between Scotland and England, it seems that at least some of the surplus demand for higher education has been diverted to Scottish institutions. This helps to explain the dramatic increase in the number of applicants from outwith Scotland to Edinburgh, for example, of nearly 25% between 1981 and 1988, compared with a marginal *decrease* in applications from Scots. For example, whereas in 1981 56% of applicants to Edinburgh were from Scots, by 1988 it was barely half. In this respect, it becomes more remarkable that the percentage of Scots *entrants* in 1988 was as much as two-thirds of all entrants.

Which University?

Having examined the effects of cuts in higher education in the eighties, the point remains – why should the Scottish universities have such a varied student composition in terms of domicile? Glasgow and Strathclyde continue to tap an overwhelmingly Scottish (probably local) constituency, while St Andrews, Stirling, Edinburgh and Dundee have an above-average proportion of non-Scots. Here we are in the realms of conjecture, because much work remains to be done on just how applicants target and select university. Some decisions will no doubt be based on the specificity of courses; some on the perceived attractions (or disincentives, real or imaginary) of living for 3 or 4 years in a particular place; and others will be influenced by the knowledge that others they know will have gone there. This last factor is likely to generate a ‘critical mass’ insofar as applicants will only apply to places they believe take ‘people like them’.

Historically, it seems that Glasgow and Aberdeen have admitted a significantly higher proportion of ‘lower class’ students than the other Scottish universities. Robert Anderson’s study⁽⁸⁾ shows that in 1912, for example, 37% of Glasgow students came from manual working class backgrounds (compared with 30% at Edinburgh, and 23% at St Andrews); Aberdeen, on the other hand, had 16% from agricultural backgrounds, compared with 4% at Edinburgh and Glasgow, and 1% at St Andrews. It is possible that these significant differences have helped to build up an ethos for different universities, which while difficult to quantify, is nonetheless real, and is reproduced over time. There is, of course, an element of self-fulfilling prophecy about these ‘reputations’ so that when students come to apply to different universities, they operate as constraints on their choices. While there is nothing as socially and culturally distinctive as ‘Oxbridge’ in this respect, similar resonances may be operating among Scottish universities. Given that for most working class people, ‘university’ is a distant, even alien, institution, it is likely that social ethos and education are so intertwined that some universities are less ‘attractive’ than others to (particularly) working class Scots.

Such reputations are hard to alter, cumulative and are not helped by adverse publicity, however misleading. The policies of universities towards fifth year entry is also likely to be significant. The west of Scotland universities, for example, take higher proportions from fifth year, and many more students live at home, thereby reinforcing the tendency to apply to the local universities. School liaison officers from other Scottish universities have found it difficult to persuade many from this heavily populated part of Scotland to consider other institutions. There are likely to be major differences in terms of precisely where ‘Scots’ are domiciled within the country. Again, the west coast universities (and possibly Aberdeen) seem to rely heavily on the local catchment area. Others like St Andrews and Stirling which do not have major conurbations on their

example, being considerably above others. Some admissions officers have reviewed the ratio insofar as the minimum A level qualification has been raised from three at grades BCC to BBC, while allowing the Highers minimum of four at BBBB to stand. There is scope for this, but it has to be said that most A-level applicants may offer significantly above the minimum anyway. There is little evidence that Scottish universities are admitting A-level candidates with poor qualifications.

Strictly speaking, Highers and A-levels are, like apples and oranges, not directly comparable. However, insofar as universities do have to make decisions between candidates with different qualifications, comparisons are inevitable. There is a real fear (reflected in the St Andrews controversy about high fail rates among first year Scots) that too many A-level entrants will have the effect of raising first year university standard beyond the capacity of Highers candidates, that university teachers will teach to A-level rather than Higher level. There is, however, little evidence that admissions tutors select GCE applicants on this basis, and as the data showed earlier, Scots applicants have a ‘better’ chance of becoming entrants than GCE applicants.

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What other mechanisms are available for increasing the proportion of Scots applicants? For some with a longer memory of the old Attestation of Fitness in the pre-UCCA days comes the suggestion that all who have this attestation (‘university entrance’, as those old enough might remember it) should automatically get a place. Nevertheless, the problem would remain, namely, that given the considerable demand for university places today, admissions officers would still have to find a mechanism of selection. If they

were to rely on interviews rather than, as at present, level of qualification, then there is a risk that other social considerations would intervene so that those judged 'worthy' of a university education would be offered a place, with all the regressive social bias that this would probably (as it did in the old days) involve. Formal qualifications may themselves be influenced by social considerations (parental encouragement, sibling experience, the capacity to postpone entry into the labour market), but they represent a kind of roughly equal justice compared with what might be put in their place. At a time when there is likely to be much greater dependence on the ability to 'buy' higher education than for at least fifty years, departing from formal qualifications as the key measure of 'fitness' would be socially regressive and intellectually flawed.

Universities: Scottish or British?

Ultimately, the issue of the anglicisation of the Scottish universities resonates of a wider one – the extent to which they are Scottish or British, and if so, to what degree. There are two polar positions in which the issues are virtually clear-cut and unproblematic. From the 'British' perspective, there is no issue, because nowadays there is no such thing as a 'Scottish' university: they are all funded by the University Grants Council (latterly, the University Funding Council), which receives its funds from the UK Department of Education and Science, and ultimately the Treasury. Indeed, Aberdeen University is no different from Aston University in this respect. As long as Scottish applicants are treated fairly in non-Scottish universities, why shouldn't non-Scots come here? This is a view which is heard within the Scottish universities, but which is historically naive and politically dangerous. First, it ignores the pedagogical differences between the Scottish education system (breadth versus depth) and the rest. Second, it invites the closer integration of the Scottish and English degree structures. It threatens to sell the pass on the four year degree.

The second or 'Scottish' perspective on the problem is the one which has driven the debate in recent years. This states that the Scottish education system is different, represents not simply a difference of history, but of national identity, of soul. To dilute the Scottishness of the universities is to destroy the nation, and its sacred values; it is to invite the ultimate demise of the education system and in the end, Scotland. This is the position which George Davie's *Democratic Intellect* set out to advance by showing how the Scottish universities both chose and were forced to trim to the needs of UK government, with both cultural and political repercussions. To advocates of this position, major shifts in the ethnic composition of undergraduates follows on from the fact that, they claim, university teachers are themselves non-Scots, and that there is precious little left of 'Scottish' studies in the university curriculum, and what there is lies beached on the far shores of intellectual endeavour – some history, folklore, literature.

Is there a middle position? In many respects, the two positions outlined above have their equivalents in political-constitutional debate – the case for the status quo, the Union, as preached by Mrs Thatcher's Conservatives; and the case for outright Independence, as preached by the SNP. Those like the late John P. Mackintosh who argued that Scots have dual nationality, both British and Scottish, have to make a case for the scale, prestige and variety of the British university system, together with recognition of Scotland's significant contribution to intellectual endeavour, and for its cultural distinctiveness. The ambivalence of the Scottish universities to their devolution in 1979 and again in the 1980s is not simply (if at all) the result of the fact that they are full of 'English' academics (though no-one has counted). Indeed, ethnicity is no respecter of field of study. Major contributions to our understanding of Scottish society, history and culture have been made by 'English' academics at Scottish universities.

Until the recent round of cuts, the Scottish universities had done well out of the allocation of central funds, and benefitted from the links and networks of the UK system. At the same time, the case for devolving control of Scottish university finance to a single higher education body as advocated by the Scottish Tertiary Education Advisory Council in 1985 grows stronger the longer the present government is in power. The shift in attitude among the Association of University Teachers in 1989 towards Scottish control of its universities is one latest manifestation of this change. Attacks on Scottish universities by the Chief Executive of the UK University Funding Council aid the cause of 'repatriation'. If the Scottish universities are hesitant about coming under the wing of the Scottish Education Department, then that is partly because that body does not have a progressive reputation in university circles. As it stands, a scheme for swapping Michael Forsyth for John MacGregor does not strike Scotland's universities as a very good idea. Scotland with its own Assembly or Parliament would be quite another matter. If and when that occurs, the issue of student composition at Scotland's universities will indeed be 'academic'.

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