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**THEMATIC REVIEW OF THE FIRST YEARS OF TERTIARY EDUCATION**

**COUNTRY NOTE: UNITED KINGDOM**

This Country Note was prepared by a Secretariat-led review team as input to the first stage of the OECD Education Committee's Thematic Review of the First Years of Tertiary Education. The views expressed are those of the review team. They do not commit the OECD or the countries concerned.

A comparative report for the first stage of the thematic review will be published by the OECD in the last quarter of 1997. Inquiries may be directed to OECD Publications.

## Introduction

The United Kingdom is one of ten countries\* participating in the OECD thematic review of the first years of tertiary education. At the invitation of the Higher Education Directorate of the Department for Education and Employment in association with its sister authorities in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, a review team visited England and Scotland in September 1996 and had meetings with representatives of all four United Kingdom systems. Our report is informed by the experience of the visit and the numerous meetings -- including site visits to institutions and organisations -- by background reports provided by the national authorities and by a number of other reports, documents and publications charting and assessing recent changes in tertiary education policy in the U.K.

The purpose of a thematic review is to enable member countries of the OECD to examine and debate, on a comparative basis, recent trends in a selected area or topic of educational policy and practice. The area of "tertiary education" is broad; its boundaries are not always clear or definite. For purposes of this thematic review, "tertiary" refers to a level or standard of study, beyond secondary and embracing what participating countries define as both higher education and aspects of further or post-secondary education. Although some ambiguities arise internationally in the distinction often drawn between "post-secondary" and "tertiary", the focus of this review is clear in respect of the U.K.: it is teaching and learning at first degree or equivalent level. These form part of the U.K. higher education system and that term is used in this note.

Since a major interest of the comparative study is the relationship of tertiary education to employment, attention is directed at the initial qualifications which typically or most frequently provide entry to the labour market. Sub-degree work is of interest where it relates closely to degree work, for example through structures for articulation, progression, credit transfer and the like. Nevertheless, in the U.K. visit the focus has been higher education whether in universities or the further education sector.

The term "first years" also requires comment. A striking feature across countries is the difference in the length and nature of studies leading to an initial qualification that has significant currency in the labour market. In several Continental European countries, for example, there is no precise equivalent to the bachelor's degree and the period of study leading to an initial qualification in the university sector is frequently in the four-to six-year range, and may be rather longer in practice. Moreover, for growing numbers of mature age, usually part-time students, "first years", may mean a prolonged period of study, combined with work or family responsibilities, carried out between the ages of thirty to fifty (or more). Such trends, highly visible in the U.K., are but one of several indices of the dramatic change that has occurred as higher education is being transformed from an elite into a mass system.

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\* The ten countries are, in order visited: Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Norway, Sweden, Belgium (Flemish Community), Denmark, Germany, United Kingdom, United States (Commonwealth of Virginia).

Some countries, notably the US. and Japan, have become accustomed to the phenomenon of rates of participation of 40-50 per cent or more of a defined age cohort in some kind of tertiary education; others, Finland is an example, are moving towards those figures. This evolution reflects a variety of factors which have been identified in the overall thematic review: individual values, expectations and aspirations, for which there are many and varied motives; the needs of a changing economy for ever higher levels of skill and a deepening and wider diffusion of knowledge and understanding; and the challenges of increasingly complex and sophisticated social and cultural life. Although difficult to quantify, these factors seem highly likely to continue to drive demand. All countries participating in this review are experiencing considerable pressure and difficulty as demand for access continues to grow, and to diversify.

In the United Kingdom as elsewhere, the sheer growth of demand poses obvious problems with which policy makers and institutional providers are thoroughly familiar. Financing the needed provision and the costs that fall on individual students is not the only one of these problems, but is of central importance and serves as a signal to several other key issues which we take up in this note. Finance and other issues are exacerbated when demand substantially exceeds projections -- as has been common everywhere. They are compounded when financial policies impose sharp constraints on expenditure, resulting for example in rapid and substantial cuts in unit costs as has happened in the past few years in the U.K.

There is difficulty in making rapid adjustments in supply when the institutions that are largely responsible for it have structures and procedures, values and interests that derive from a previous era when numbers were relatively few. In the pre-1992 universities especially, decision-making has been very much a matter of internal debate along "collegial" lines, and the demands of the wider society could be filtered and addressed in ways reflecting more the inner working of the institution than the force of those external pressures. Likewise, what students were taught and how they were assessed, while subject to external influences, have been until recently very much the province of individual institutions.

This is not to suggest, however, that higher education institutions were, in the period prior to the rapid expansion that followed the publication of the Robbins Report and accelerated in the '80s, indifferent to social demand and resistant to the emerging public policy agenda. The further education colleges have always related very closely to their environments and especially to the labour market as have many university programmes. The evidence in the higher education sector generally points to a prolonged period of adjustment, adaptation and increasing responsiveness dating back several decades: it has not been a "sudden awakening". This responsiveness, although occasionally criticised by our interlocutors in the course of the review visit for its insufficiency, was generally acknowledged to have been profound, a mark of considerable achievement by the higher education sector in the face of very substantial challenges.

At the same time, the review team encountered many cross currents: there were divergent, at times conflicting, views about the overall direction of policy. Questions were raised about purposes and values as well as procedures and resources. This is inevitable and may indeed be regarded as thoroughly healthy in pluralistic democratic society undergoing a period of rapid, far-reaching change, not only in tertiary education but across the whole spectrum of education and public policy generally, when new directions and possibilities are emerging and challenges, sometimes contradictory, are posed from different quarters. What we thought important, in this environment, is the openness of the debate, not least the contributions of the higher education press and the journals of research and discussion, paralleled in very few other countries. We were aware, too, of a readiness not only to formulate new goals and directions but to sustain the policy dialogue through monitoring of effects, research and rigorous analysis.

There is an impressive scale and range of policy, ideas and initiatives, reflecting a determination to address basic issues and grapple with fundamental trends and problems in the economy and society.

In a climate of substantial change as the U.K. adjusts to new global realities and repositions its economy, prominent national bodies continue to produce key documents and to publicise their ideas. In addition to the Department for Education and Employment and from time to time other government departments, many organisations -- including the Confederation of British Industry, the Council for Industry and Higher Education, the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, the National Union of Students, the Association of University Teachers, the Association of University and College Lecturers, the Engineering Council and a number of other professional bodies -- are making significant contributions to the debate. The review team was fortunate in having opportunity to meet and discuss issues with such bodies. In addition, the establishment of the national inquiry into higher education under the chairmanship of Sir Ron Dearing, whom we had the pleasure of meeting, has fostered a considerable volume of analysis and debate concerning further directions for the system.

With the possible exception of New Zealand, in none of the countries taking part in this review have changes in higher education policy and structure been greater and the debate more intense than in the United Kingdom. It is of interest that these two countries have been singled out in the *OECD Jobs Study Follow Up* as having made the most comprehensive structural changes in the process of economic renewal.

The reviewers have valued the opportunity to witness at first hand a key part of the U.K. transformation, namely its tertiary education system, and much appreciate having such direct access to the currents of opinion that inform or are inspired by it. We wish to record our thanks particularly to Mr. C.A. Clark and Ms Katherine Fleay of the DfEE, and to all the officials in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland for the efforts they made to help us understand the context and direction of the changes in higher education. We are grateful, too, to the organisations with whom we had valuable discussions and to the institutions we were able to visit. In a short visit it was possible to take in only a small part, particularly of the institutional provision, and where we refer to individual institutions it is not to single them out for special notice -- deserved as that may be -- but to illustrate something of more general interest.

### **Education in a Phase of Expansion, Development and Change**

The changes in higher education in the U.K. are not isolated but relate to, indeed can be seen as an integral part of, a broader youth education policy orientation which has been developing for more than a decade. Affecting the whole of the U.K. to different degrees, this is perhaps most readily observed in Scotland, particularly the new structures that are being created to achieve a continuity and consistency of both policy and provision for the post-compulsory years, i.e. for all young people from age sixteen onwards. The unification of previously disparate qualifications at the end of secondary schooling under the "Higher Still", which is in final stages of preparation, is an example of the intention to produce a coherent structure of qualifications embracing all students. Characteristic of the new structures as they are emerging throughout the U.K. are first, inclusiveness: the view that all young people should continue their education full- or part-time, in some form or other, beyond the years of compulsory schooling; second, that there should be a definite provision and a clear awareness or pathways of progression to ensure that choices are based on relevant knowledge and that learning can be continuous and progressive; third, that the complexity and unevenness of the numerous and disparate public examinations for sixteen to eighteen year olds should be simplified and made more equitable; and, fourth, that through a variety of procedures

for credit transfer, recognition of and cross-validation of qualifications, a well-articulated system embracing all forms of further, continuing and higher education is put in place.

Close attention is being paid to transition issues. An overarching framework of universal, lifelong learning has been adopted, although no-one in the U.K. would claim that its implications for practice have been fully worked out. Nor is it suggested that all the major problems have been solved. Together with the continuing efforts to construct a comprehensive, well-articulated framework for education post-16, for at least a decade there have been sustained efforts to improve the quality of education notably in primary and in secondary schools, and to overcome the weaknesses of vocational training and to raise participation beyond the years of compulsory schooling from historically low levels. Our attention was drawn, for example, to the development of General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) alongside the well-regarded A-levels, the implementation of the National Curriculum and various procedures designed to raise standards of student performance at school and improve the overall quality of education and training at all levels.

These and other changes, highly significant for the future of the country, have been quite radical in their intent. They are being pursued with obvious determination, sometimes in the face of considerable opposition, and with considerable flow-on effects, which include increased participation levels in higher education. The objective has been reconstruction of a system which, despite its many outstanding and internationally admired features, was not meeting the new needs arising from the role of the U.K. in the changing global and European environment.

Thus in the changes sought in educational provision, structure and quality, there has been an underlying transformation of purposes and values, a recasting of expectations and requirements and a regrouping of interests and stakeholders. In the new policy mix, several highly visible elements have been constantly projected: the determination to give greater salience to the market, hence to the interests and needs of the "consumers" most frequently defined as students, families and employers; the need for informed choices to be made by individuals; programmes to encourage young people to continue their education beyond the legally permitted school leaving age of 16 years (the government target is qualitative as well as quantitative: 60 per cent of young people attaining N.V.Q. level 3 (A-level or equivalent by the year 2000); sharpening the definition of quality and relevance through increased responsiveness to the needs of employers; raising standards of student performance in light of the demands of the knowledge-based society and international competitiveness; and the introduction of greater transparency and accountability into the domains of both educational policy and institutional practice.

Obviously, such changes do not occur by chance although they may proceed in a largely uncoordinated way where government stands to one side or systematically devolves decision making and responsibility to regional or local entities. However, this has not been the policy adopted in the U.K. where reform of education (and of other areas, too) has been comprehensively steered not by parliament and central government departments alone so much as by concerted effort with an array of national authorities and bodies charged to create new structures, roles and relationships within the overall framework of government policy. Thus, in higher education, decision making is shared, with different kinds of steering and responsibility exercised by a range of public, quasi public and independent agencies: the education departments or offices of England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland; separate higher and further education funding bodies or offices; the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals, including its Higher Education Quality Council; and a number of peak bodies or research and advisory councils such as the Council for Industry and Higher Education, the Confederation of British Industry, and others.

Thus, responsibility, decision making and advice are not concentrated in any single agency; nevertheless, there is clearly a sense of purpose or direction, more or less shared among these and other bodies. While this certainly does not mean an absence of debate or conflict, the boundaries are well marked and understood; different positions are taken up but they are within one recognisable arena. This holds true, also, of the devolution process insofar as it relates to institutions: U.K. higher education institutions, for example, enjoy a very high degree of autonomy in their control of funds; they are free to earn, to invest, to borrow, and in other ways to maximise returns on their assets. But, for undergraduates, they have hitherto been discouraged from introducing fees over and above the level which is reimbursed. For the public funds they receive there are clear procedures of accountability and, during the past five years, the national (quality) assessments of research and teaching have become detailed and highly demanding. The prized autonomy of universities is real, but is conditioned by a strong national policy framework set by legislation and subject to a complex set of steering arrangements.

We return to the issues of accountability and autonomy later in this note. They and other effects or manifestations of the changes in policy structures and educational practice are controversial. The debates surrounding them serve to highlight a wider array of issues in higher education as its relations with society become ever closer and more complex.

### **A Drive for Economic Efficiency and Improved Performance**

The benefits to the individual and to the community of broadly based education for all are generally acknowledged, but the real catalyst for change on the large scale presently experienced is the perceived need to shift the fundamental nature of the workforce to one where skills and qualifications lead to flexibility, adaptability and economic competitiveness. A well educated workforce, it is argued, will lead to a more competitive economy, better living conditions and a more stable, sound society.

It is clear that the world will be increasingly shaped by the value put on education; and that the demand for talented people will strengthen even further. This puts a premium on graduates and it is worth noting that in a recently published survey of graduates and their careers, many employers recognised the specific qualities graduates bring to the workforce while noting -- as has often been remarked -- that significant cultural gaps between the institutions and the workplace still exist. We return to this issue in discussing the purpose of tertiary education and partnerships with industry.

In many reports and public statements it has been argued that the low (but improving) efficiency, effectiveness and competitiveness of British industry when compared with several other countries are largely because it is specifically structured to accommodate a labour force that has had traditionally the low overall levels of skills that follow inevitably from a highly selective if high quality education offered to a small minority. It was suggested to us, for example in meetings with the Deputy Prime Minister's Competitiveness Unit and with industry bodies, that U.K. industry would only change, indeed that it could only change, when the level of skills and education in the community increased and that it would be competitive when those levels were a match for the competitor nations. Higher education, it was stated, has a major contribution to make in this respect and is already doing so, in part at least. ref. White Paper on Competitiveness: Creating the *Enterprise Centre of Europe*, June 1996, para. 4.1]

Of course, many nations have identified the same need and are moving forward, some of them from positions already ahead of the U.K. So it is not simply a question of starting a process but rather of establishing a scale and a pace that will match or exceed the rate of development in other countries. The procedures adopted include target setting and projects by HEIs, funded under the government's Enterprise

in Higher Education (EHE) initiative to promote the development of more enterprising graduates. The process must be radical; it cannot simply be one of educating the traditional, small group better or for longer but in the same way. It must be one that increases the number of educated people in the community, ensuring that this larger number has had access to a range of educational experiences that suits their interests, capabilities and community needs. For education generally, tertiary education in particular, the main pre-occupations have therefore become quality, relevance and funding, in a context of substantially increasing participation rates from age 16 (the legally permitted school leaving age) upwards.

When the public carries a large proportion of the cost of higher education, as is the case in the U.K., it is inevitable that the public's representatives, politicians, will seek to impose certain requirements on a sector that is such a large recipient of public funds. The prominent role of industry peak bodies in the policy debate on tertiary education has clearly been a factor in the process and outcomes of policy formation. It is also inevitable that an education system, offering as it does the opportunity for economic and social advancement for individuals as well as the community more broadly, will be a key plank in social policy platforms that may extend well beyond the education sector. Tertiary education policy does not reflect only industry needs or economic concerns more generally.

Governments will want to massage the system -- to achieve equity objectives, to increase the number of engineers, to increase the numbers of women in non-traditional areas, to concentrate research funding and to encourage research in some areas at the expense of others, to introduce accountability requirements and scrutiny. These are being accomplished, not by direction or anything resembling manpower planning but by government's new active presence in the policy debate, by the use of incentives and by the system of shared decision making and strategic targets already referred to. It is an appropriate role for governments to develop the system in this way, within a context of largely autonomous institutions embracing government policy in their own way albeit influenced by the Funding Councils which sit between them and the government, by quality assurance and information requirements and by developments in the wider environment.

## **Diversity and Choice**

It seems to be generally accepted in the U.K. that it was necessary to abolish the distinction between the universities and the polytechnics. This followed a government policy statement in 1991. There are now 89 universities and 69 colleges of higher education (each of the latter having more than 55 per cent of their full-time equivalent students enrolled on higher education courses).

The change has meant that the United Kingdom now has a university system that is apparently more inclusive than the exclusive one suggested by the previous binary system of universities and polytechnics. While there was some divergence of views amongst the university students interviewed, many felt that it was important for them, and their parents, friends, relatives, that they were attending university and implied that the binary divide was anachronistic. For them, the change has been for the better, though this is not the universal view. Moreover, the higher education role of the further education sector must be borne in mind. In the U.K., as in all other systems, there is a very considerable variety of higher education providers.

There are still arguments about the desirability or otherwise of a binary divide, in the U.K. and elsewhere. There are also arguments about how real the change is and whether it is simply a re-labelling of institutions with little change in their operations. What appears likely is that many of the "newer" universities will devote a greater proportion of their energies than hitherto to establishing a research base

and developing the capacity to compete in the research arena. It is virtually inevitable that this will happen since these universities will seek to be at least competitive in the search for the best staff, who arguably will be attracted by the opportunities to conduct research, and to gain the prestige that flows from a research base. The latter is important not just because it is there and because substantial funding also flows from superior research performance, but also because the teaching in higher education, when not based directly on research, is done best if conducted in an environment where intellectual inquiry is also a valued activity.

In their institutional visits, the reviewers were made aware of the diversity of missions of tertiary institutions: there are distinct differences, for example, between Sheffield Hallam University and Sheffield University; between Nene College of Higher Education and Northampton College of Further Education. Had our visits included other institutions -- Cambridge University, Birkbeck College, the Open University or the University of Wales, for example -- the differences would have been even more apparent. It is not clear whether the financial consequences of the research assessment exercise of the higher education funding bodies, which has clearly fostered a research climate overall, will result in a weakening of the research endeavour of those institutions which consistently score at the lower levels. If this were to occur, in a situation where high teaching ratings have tended to correlate with high research ratings there will be a question to address about the mission of these institutions and the nature of the learning opportunities they provide to students. Perhaps there will need to be a more formal recognition of the broadening of the conceptions of research and scholarship that now figure in some institutional procedures (promotions, for example). The changing roles of the colleges of higher education and the continuum between them and the university sector is clearly relevant and will presumably feature in the report of the current higher education inquiry.

If the newer universities pursue the traditional university model too vigorously, then something else is likely to fill the void, real or apparent. The colleges of further education may be so inclined, or private providers. Moreover, employer-provided formal qualifications appear to be growing. There can be little doubt that they are of value to employers (or they would not do them) and fill what they must see as a deficiency in the sector's offerings. Whether they are of broader value remains to be established. They may constrain the employee if he or she wishes to change employers, or careers, or work to the disadvantage of the community if they impose, unintentionally, a rigidity on the workforce because they are not readily transportable between employers or between industry sectors.

But, students are not passive recipients in this field. Some are opting for employer-provided learning opportunities over those available through formal higher education programmes. For reasons of relevance, modes and quality of teaching and learning as well as costs and greater prospects for immediate employment, if not careers. They also can, and do, combine these employer-provided qualifications with those offered by higher education institutions. These developments demonstrate the scope for diverse provision and point up the need for student preferences and decision making to figure in the policy discussions. In this overall, comparative review, we have constantly drawn attention to the importance of demand both individual and social, as a driving force in changing policies and practices. Diversity of provision is one, crucial, way of acknowledging the force of demand.

Diversity and choice are indeed key characteristics of the restructured U.K. tertiary education system, and they should represent themselves in a diversity of purpose and a diversity of approach. A system growing and responding to the needs of an increasingly heterogeneous group of students must work actively to maintain its diversity -- and offer choice to intending students. There are different ways emerging of how institutions are responding to this challenge. Some seem to have acknowledged that a diverse system will result in some institutions not offering every speciality; instead, in a networking or a

franchising arrangement students taking their degree might take some topics from another university or college of further education. Such arrangements appear to be flourishing and are a positive response to the need to maintain differences and choice.

## **The Multiple Purposes of Tertiary Education**

Because the institutions are now, and likely to remain, diverse in their approaches to education, there can be no set view on what is a higher education or degree. What advantages accrue to a community from the presence in their midst of this array of expensive institutions? What is a university or higher education in the reconstructed tertiary sector and what are the values of a degree? These are not new questions, as there is an extensive literature and a wealth of data on the nature and purpose of higher education on the one hand and, on the other, on private and social returns to higher education. Calculations of returns continue to suggest that, at least in terms of earnings differentials and contributions to economic growth, higher education pays. It is also recognised that there are non-monetary benefits and value is attached to equity in participation and in improved career possibilities. With respect to the latter, while progress has been made (not least through the recent expansion in enrolment), patterns of participation in higher education reflect a persistence of socio-economic factors, which indeed may be found in all the other countries participating in this thematic review. Questions on the meaning and value of higher education are being debated, with very useful contributions, for example, from the Higher Education Quality Council, the Council for Industry and Higher Education, and the Confederation of British Industry among others on the (desirable) attributes of the graduate.

Universities were once defined relatively straightforwardly, if ideally, as institutions in which the search for greater knowledge and understanding was carried out without the distraction of other pursuits. While the search for knowledge for its own sake remains one of the key functions, universities have also become more of an instrument -- a means as well as an end. This creates dangers as well as opportunity. Too great a focus on the means could detract from the intrinsic value of learning. That, at least, is the view eloquently expressed by the former President of Harvard University who, in surveying the diversity of American higher education noted that pressures for greater attention to means

"undermine (the) intellectual standards and values and expose (the university) to the endless petty distractions and corruptions of the outside world ... after all in the perspective of centuries, it is not the generals or the presidents, nor the experts who advised them, but social critics, philosophers, and the purest of scientists who have left the most enduring mark on our civilisation".

(Universities and the Future of America, Derek Bok, 1990.)

None of which is to argue that universities do not have an obligation to attend to some of the great issues confronting society in very practical ways. If the trained young minds do not use the new knowledge and apply it for the benefit of society in tangible ways -- prosperity, cultural and social richness, fairness and justice -- society may well ask why bother.

The redefinition of universities themselves creates the opportunity: in a system that retains a diversity of approach, there must be room for ones that focus more on the pursuit of abstract and theoretical knowledge while others take a more practical approach. The community gets the best of both options when combined in a system which in the United Kingdom includes colleges and institutions of higher education and former polytechnics which have very different roots, structures and cultural formations from those institutions tracing their origins to the Medieval and Enlightenment periods in European history.

There have been and will continue to be attempts to define the special characteristics of a graduate. Given the complex of different institutions with different missions and different foci in courses even within one discipline, it is not surprising that there is no single acceptable definition.

However, we were very interested in the work being done by the HEQC on "graduateness". Despite the complexity of the task and the criticisms that have been directed at it, we would emphasise the value of the process as part of "transparency" and the effort to achieve more consistent standards across the system, counterpointing "diversity".

### **Challenges to the Institutions**

The rethinking of purposes and efforts to clarify the outcomes of education including the attributes of the graduate are positive results of the changes taking place in the higher education environment. They are interwoven with efforts to strengthen the capacity of the institutions to meet, or to meet at an adequate level, the pressures falling upon them.

Funding has become an even more important issue than hitherto. From 1989 to 1995 public funding per student decreased by approaching 30%, as overall levels of funding increased with expanding enrolments. As enrolment has levelled off, further cuts of some 8 per cent in per student subsidies translate into decreases in institutional budgets. But, this needs to be put in perspective. The higher education system is almost entirely funded from public sources, which are necessarily constrained for a number of reasons, both economic and political. On the other hand, the institutions need resources in order to provide education of the necessary quality and to satisfy increased demand. A consequence of the funding crisis was a proposal from Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals for the introduction of registration levies or "top up" fees for undergraduate students. The crisis has been eased by the Government's 1996 Budget settlement for universities, announced after the review team's visit. Nonetheless, the issue of adequate levels of resources remains and fees or some other form of charge falling on students is under active consideration by the committee of inquiry into higher education. Whichever government is in office following the 1997 elections will be faced with a difficult but necessary decision: whether to revert to expansionary policies in place until suspended in 1995, and if so, whether to apportion more of the tuition and maintenance costs to undergraduate students. It seems inescapable that additional resources must be provided from some source or other, even allowing for the argument from one of the peak employer bodies that further efficiency gains are possible.

The decisions taken will need to be made in recognition not only of financial considerations. There are equity issues, for example -- who benefits and who pays. As noted above, the profile of students has changed with rapid increases in enrolments, and there is now a preponderance of mature age students in the system. These students are subsidised at lower levels than younger, mostly full-time students. Future policy will need to address this balance giving further attention to the financing of part-time study from perspectives of equity, efficiency and lifelong learning. Efforts are being made to improve access for previously excluded or non-participating groups, and to increase the participation of women in male-dominated domains. But imbalances remain, and financial levers could play a more important role in addressing them.

The "first years" of tertiary education are no longer confined to or dominated by the full-time, male, on-campus student. Entrants are increasingly in their late twenties, thirties, forties or older; usually employed or seeking an avenue for return to employment; and studying part-time. As the government targets for successful completion of upper secondary or equivalent studies are met, further demand from

socio-economic categories at present under-represented can be expected, but, as we have noted, is likely to require active encouragement if present inequities are to be substantially reduced.

The abolition of the binary line has resulted in a highly competitive market. This and other changes impose considerable strains on institutions and has created a new agenda for policy makers. Competition as well as scarcity have encouraged institutions to broaden their horizons and pursue developments not traditional in their particular situations. Great energy and, often, creativity and innovation are being displayed and we were made well aware of these in institutional visits and meetings alike. Notwithstanding a continuing debate and criticism of government policy from the institutions and other quarters, morale seemed to us quite high, although this remark must be tempered by reference to new items and reports in the press that present a rather different picture. Certainly there is considerable concern within the academic profession about the relative decline in salaries and over career prospects.

There is nevertheless a commendable readiness to address these challenges and to continue the search for new solutions. Surveys of young staff demonstrate a strong commitment to the values and opportunities of an academic career. There are high expectations of the national inquiry under Sir Ron Dearing: that it has been set up with such broad terms of reference (the first on this scale for more than thirty years); that there is the prospect of a White Paper and perhaps new legislation, to address a wide range of concerns, not only but very definitely including funding issues.

Competition among institutions is a feature of the present environment. It is beneficial but is not sufficient and can result in distortions. As noted above, competition would be undesirable if the result is that institutions are standing along a single line all aiming for the same thing but differentiated by effectiveness, quality and status. There may be some risk of this as a consequence of the publicity attending the quality reviews of research and teaching. Co-operation among institutions is needed in order to strengthen pathways for students, to further develop cross-crediting and credit transfer, to produce closer articulation and improved transition arrangements and to achieve greater impact for example in regional development. These needs are part of the present policy agenda, e.g. the SHEFC "Regional Strategic Initiatives Fund" and "Use of Metropolitan Area Networks Initiative (UMI)".

Another aspect of co-operation is the partnership movement between institutions, industry and the professions exemplified in course planning, design and delivery, especially (but by no means only) in the "new" universities. There are many examples on the ground of working partnerships in course design, delivery and assessment which are of material benefit in enriching student experience.

Professional accreditation of degrees, although not new, is expanding. There are also, increasingly, arrangements for students to gain work experience. The government's Enterprise in Higher Education initiative and the work of Training Enterprise Councils have had the effect of directing public funds and drawing private resources into active teaching partnerships. We were informed in all of our institutional visits about various regionally-based co-operative initiatives which enable students to apply what they have learnt in their formal studies in the work environment (often, with an assessment of and credit for the experience and knowledge gained) and provide a value-added service for the firm or organisation concerned (a good example is the Project Link University of Sheffield, PLUS, organised within a broad framework of regional partnerships pursued by the University). Thus far, these initiatives appear to provide net benefits/gains for all parties: the institutions, the students, and the enterprises or organisations concerned. We believe that there may be scope for deepening and diversifying the partnerships in ways that build up enterprise involvement in teaching and assessment, for example by moving towards a greater sharing of responsibility by each partner as in the co-op education programmes in the United States. At the same time, we recognise the issues raised when university and student

expertise is provided at no cost charge to the partner enterprises or organisations or such enterprises and organisations provide services and facilities at no cost to the benefit of the institution and the student. In a "market" environment, such considerations will likely become more important: to what extent can -- and should -- joint products of institutional teaching programmes compete directly with private entities? Although an issue, this should not stand in the way of further extension of experiential education which enriches students' learning and enables them to understand and function effectively in the work environment.

Employers' expectations are quite visible in the form of policy statements and position papers already referred to. The team was very interested in the stringent line taken by the CBI on the need for further efficiency, but did not agree that this should include even greater concentration of the time taken to complete a degree (see 'Time-Shortened Degrees' below). We were impressed by the work of the Council for Industry and Higher Education in seeking links that bring to the fore the distinctive values of the two perspectives and the benefit to both partners of closer collaboration over ends and means.

Overall, there is a very strong and distinctive policy frame for strengthening the relations between tertiary education, the economy and social structures generally; it is not centrally imposed but is the result of interaction among an array of "significant actors": central government; the funding councils; various "peak organisations"; regional and local bodies and enterprises, not forgetting the professional associations. The system is dynamic, creative, focused -- but suffering considerable strain (arising from growth within very constrained resources). Continuing to achieve the key objectives notably high quality, efficient, relevant degree programmes (3-4 years duration with high success rates) will prove increasingly difficult unless ways are found to strengthen the resource base. We think that further investment, at this critical juncture, is warranted. The demand, both individual and social, is increasing, the system has shown a readiness and a capacity to change and to respond, and it has great potential for delivering national policy goals. But it is clearly suffering from acute resource pressures.

## **Key Issues**

A number of issues have already been foreshadowed. Here, we will highlight them and suggest some responses.

### ***Diversity and Quality***

In an era of mass participation (40 per cent or more) the meaning of tertiary education necessarily differs from an era when 5-10 per cent of the age cohort participated. In the U.K., participation is measured by reference to size of the 18/19 age group (over 30 per cent) but also by reference to the prospect of that group acquiring the qualifications throughout their life (50 per cent or more) A key question has to do with maintaining standards, and the quality of the undergraduate experience as numbers rise, learner characteristics and interests become more diverse, institutions strive to cope and resources are held in tight rein. We have already drawn attention to the very interesting -- probably unique -- work being done in U.K. by the HE sector's Higher Education Quality Council on "standards". On the other hand, the "league table" mentality in the media, in the aftermath of the research and teaching reviews, may tend towards greater conformity and can stand in the way of co-operation. Strengthening diversity, developing an acceptable concept of "standards" and maintaining quality will be beyond the capacity of the system and institutions without further effort in three directions.

First, the institutions, working in various combinations and partnerships, need to take fuller advantage of the possibilities of innovative course design and delivery. An interesting example is the design of a new learning centre by Sheffield Hallam University, whereby it has sought to revise its programmes and services to encourage and prepare students for "learning in a constrained environment". This has meant more self-study with support. Doubtless there are many such examples which point towards new ways of structuring students' learning experience. Wider dissemination and more media attention to these 'good news' stories is well worth seeking.

The Open University, a notable pioneer and leader internationally, has demonstrated that a high quality of distance education can be provided for very large numbers and has introduced many significant innovations in course design and delivery. Similarly, the further education sector has made a noteworthy contribution, by providing higher education at low marginal cost. There may be, however, some issues of quality which could be addressed through closer partnership arrangements (discussed further below).

Second, it is likely that further efficiencies can be achieved in institutional management, again through more inter-institutional collaboration including the sharing of facilities and activities. The onus on managers at all levels in institutions has never been greater and a new profession of academics-aim-managers has emerged. A high quality of decision making entails the marshalling of numerous focus and interests. These are challenges which will require increasing attention.

Third, however, we do not foresee that the benefits of the reform and the policies that underpin them can be adequately realised unless there is an overall increase in resources for higher education. A contribution by undergraduate students is one but not the only, or indeed necessarily the best, way to achieve this. There is the need for the employment sector to show a greater responsiveness and to extend and build on the various ways in which it supports the education of undergraduates. In this respect, we were impressed by examples of programmes of companies represented in the Association of Graduate Recruiters. The multiple sources of funding for tertiary education in the United States may be difficult to reproduce anywhere else but they would repay study, not least of a cultural climate in which very substantial donations to public as well as private institutions is quite normal.

Fourth, the role of the further education colleges in higher education is particularly interesting but may be unstable (or fluid/flexible). There are administrative reasons for maintaining different systems post 18 but no sharp line is intended. Some institutions are 100 per cent "higher"; some 100 per cent "further"; many are mixed. The reviewers were not clear whether there is -- or indeed whether there should be -- a definite policy framework setting future directions. Perhaps an adventitious or locally-contrived pattern is sufficient but, if so, there is need for greater rigour in quality assurance. We were not entirely convinced that there is sufficient quality control over university-level work in further education, and there is clearly a concern to address over franchising.

### ***Time-Shortened Degrees***

The sharpening of the focus on employment outcomes is a striking feature and a significant development of recent years in higher education. This gives rise to a question about the overall balance of undergraduate studies. If a "liberal" view of employment is taken, emphasis is given to generic skills and to modern forms of general education. The latter approach is a marked feature of recent reform measures in the US., as recorded in the country note following a review team visit to Virginia. A narrower, more immediately instrumental view promotes more specific vocational orientations. Probably both are needed in a balance with wider educational goals and values. The reviewers heard arguments for a shorter degree

but were not impressed. There are a few accelerated two year degree courses for mature students; but these are exceptions and we believe are likely to remain so. The current debating point is whether there ought to be a one or two year qualification in higher education to allow for progression through to a degree, the idea being that some students may want to enter employment after two years, perhaps to return later to pursue a degree part-time. There are already some two year courses (leading to the Higher National Diploma, a well-established vocational award) and this is now used by some students as a route to a full first degree. With some modifications to embrace transferable skills, they might offer a model for the future. In the event, there is discussion of 2 + 1 or 2 + 2 degree courses.

England has the shortest or one of the shortest periods for a first degree in Europe and this follows what many regard as an over-specialised curriculum in upper secondary education (although new entrants are presenting much broader backgrounds -- a wider range of subjects -- than hitherto). We are not clear about the benefits of a two year stage or phase in higher education. It would be out of line with international practice and it is not clear what advantages (apart from some short-term cost gains) there are or might be. Indeed, there is an argument for continuing, or reviving, more "general education" in the first degree and -- US. style -- enlarging and strengthening more specific vocational studies beyond the first degree (as is happening, e.g. in taught master's programmes). An increase in the number of two-year programmes which at a later stage might lead to a bachelor's degree (e.g. after a period of employment, travel, leisure) could, of course, result in greater flexibility. If decisions are taken to enlarge the provision of a two-year stage or qualification, such programmes would need to be very carefully designed and delivered, if internationally comparable standards are to be maintained and a sound basis provided for full degree level work.

### *The Questions of Autonomy, Diversity and Steering*

The autonomy of institutions is a very prominent, traditional and admirable characteristic of the U.K. university system, and several Continental European systems are in this respect moving in the United Kingdom direction. Autonomy is seen to be one of the keys to future development. But there have been changes in the nature of university interaction with many agencies -- industrial, commercial, government -- which may profoundly limit autonomy and so affect the way institutions can respond to change. While no evidence of deliberate attempts to erode institutional autonomy was brought forward, there are obvious pressures that individually may be slight but collectively could impede the development of institutions if left unchecked.

There are numerous examples where balance and fine judgement are needed if real autonomy is to be maintained and extended throughout the whole domain of higher education. One is the impact of central planning and objectives and the definition of goals for higher education. If these are too restrictive, they will work against diversity and difference; on the other hand, if they are too open-ended, they could be useless. Another example is the development of accountability mechanisms, quite proper in a publicly funded system, but which may result in an unfortunate convergence to the norms set probably inadvertently by those requiring accountability. Likewise, in the identification of "best practice", the notion that seems to be a component of most attempts at accountability or quality assessments and is taken from industry, is one which, if uncritically embraced by the education sector, could lead to the diminution of another "best practice" in the higher education sector -- the deliberate and managed differences between institutions.

There are some "intrusions" which are arguably more acceptable than others. If, as part of overall social policy, the government of the day were to implement specific equity and access objectives in

its public higher education sector, there could be few who would argue. As we have noted, more attention needs to be paid to encouraging access by particular disadvantaged groups in the community. The number of students from these groups has increased as the total student population has increased. Critics claim that, since the proportion has remained constant, the policies are of limited use. The other side argues that the wrong question has been asked: are these students succeeding and is the attention the institutions are giving to support and assistance schemes for such students assisting them to succeed? The answer is, probably, yes. Policy intervention at the national level to further strengthen low participation categories both for access and in particular disciplines would be warranted.

Another "intrusion" might be an attempt at rationalisation on, say quality grounds. Can the U.K. sustain approximately 140 engineering programmes? Might the answer be to let the institutions develop what the market will sustain while accepting that public funds will be used to support programmes that are barely viable -- to let the poorest wither because students no longer find the programmes responsive to their interests or needs or because employers will not take on the graduates and the students will get the message? Or is it better for there to be a policy response that "encourages" collaboration and co-operation? We have given a positive answer to this question in support of a central steering function, and there are implications for national policy.

In the end, autonomy is an issue for the institutions to articulate: what autonomy is and why it is of real importance. They might decide to define it in different ways according to their particular contexts and aims. But autonomy is important because it permits higher education institutions to determine whom to employ, and whom to enrol, and importantly, to let their expert staff charged with teaching and with interpreting and discovering knowledge to develop courses and processes that are appropriate to the field and to research in areas where others may not have gone. Its importance is not simply because it is a long-standing tradition sustained through the centuries. Nor is it of real concern because it lets institutions hide their inefficiencies or lets them remain aloof to the point that they feel little need to explain what they do, and why, and how they know that they do well what they set out to do. The modern world is simply not that permissive -- and the U.K. system has taken significant steps in positive directions to develop information and transparency for all parties and to encourage and promote reflection by those within institutions -- from administrators to individual teachers and research staff -- on these matters. It has recognised the need for change, and has put in place mechanisms to monitor the impact of that change: there are significant and proper accountability mechanisms, and the quality process is well embedded and open.

Some excellent examples of the need for balanced judgement result from the trend towards new university/client relationships. While it is highly appropriate for a university to establish relationships with students and employers, it was apparent to the reviewers that there are those who believe that they, or their organisation, know exactly what is required of a course, its content and assessment and that institutions should embrace their wisdom. Clients are well able to express needs and should be encouraged to articulate them. But there would be no need for institutions or structured study programmes if clients know just how best to meet those needs. Dialogue whereby needs awareness can be analysed and enlarged is needed. Coupled with targeted research funding mechanisms and the pressure for collaboration and team work where possible, the pressure to comply with detailed prescriptions and rules set externally is sometimes extreme. It is not suggested that these pressures are always inappropriate, but they may in impinging on autonomy also result in marked inefficiencies of response. They may very usefully require a rethinking of how the modern higher education institution can manage itself, develop its strengths, set its own objectives and policies, choose which students to admit with what prior educational attainment, which staff to employ, which research to conduct and how, which teaching methods to employ and when, how to blend full and part-time students, how to set the balance of school leavers and mature

age entrants within a raft of externally-imposed rules. There are important tasks for institutions but if they were to take the form of presented rules coupled with forces outside the control of the institution -- student demand rising and falling in particular discipline areas, programmes gaining or losing popularity in unpredictable ways, staff coming and going --- the ability of a higher education system to respond quickly on a system-wide basis would be much too constrained and limited. There is an active national debate and careful analyses which expose wide-ranging views on these issues, some unstructured and some organised within useful fora such as that provided by the CIHE and informal parliamentary groups among others.

The institutions need to know employers' views on the changing environment and the needs of industry and industry needs to know the values, expectations and capability of the institutions. Inappropriate prescriptiveness is avoided in this two-way communication.

A regime of autonomous but different institutions responding to the external pressures in their own way and in their own time is likely to lead to a good outcome in spite of occasional failures of management or responsiveness to client needs. So governments coming to terms with large and growing higher education systems and their costs must ensure that the complex of policies does not diminish autonomy and diversity even as an unintended consequence of what may seem to be an appropriate response in a context of more limited resources. An example of an unintended (and undesirable) outcome of a policy shift could be the effect on the Scottish system, with its four year programmes leading to Honours contrasting with the English three-year degree, were the shift to student pays (fees or living expenses) to become more significant for a large number of students. Another example could be the stress on narrow efficiency criteria which do not allow for the likelihood that some initiatives of innovative and responsive institutions might well fail.

### *Developing Competence*

Within its context, the U.K. higher education system has adapted well to change: the government has articulated a policy of growth and the system has responded. There has been a rapid, substantial growth in participation by students and, importantly, an increased number of students from groups within the community who have not commonly participated before. This has all been done with marginal funding so that the *per capita* rate has declined rapidly and significantly. Both the character of the students entering the U.K. system, and the decline in funding, have led some to question the ability of the HEIs to maintain the high quality and the care for students which are part of the universities' proud tradition.

We were informed about the correspondence between high ratings for teaching and research alike in many of the older universities in the quality assurance methodology used between 1992 and 1995. One effect of this was to sharpen the distinction between the older universities in which research featured and the newer ones in which it had not. Under the current methodology no such clear relationship can be seen. The question we wish to raise is whether differences among HEIs in terms of mission, structure and approaches to teaching and learning will be valued as contributions to a differentiated system. When some institutions score highly on all or most criteria and others on none or practically none questions naturally arise as to whether all students are having access to types of education of more or less equal value.

The issue is complex. It is not a matter of uniformity or standardisation but of different dimensions of quality on the one hand, and the ability of all institutions on the other, to meet reasonable standards. Parity of esteem is important if diversity is to be safeguarded.

The employer perspective will be important in changing attitudes. The elimination of the binary system and the resultant diversity of institutions and outcomes will mean that employers must go beyond a set view of a graduate, or their preconceptions of a university degree, to a position where they evaluate a candidate and what he or she has achieved: does the person fit the task? Even this is not straightforward, as different students will have studied different topics even within the one degree. The CBI suggested that employers will respond by pushing for competency-based assessment to comprise a larger proportion of university assessment. Some students supported this view; they saw competences as a means of opening chances for employment beyond the influences and the traditional recruitment patterns from their particular institutions.

Competences are a significant element of the education debate in a number of countries; in the U.K. it is no different. Communication skills, team work, initiative as well as advanced levels of literacy, numeracy all form part of the debate. While competence in a range of generic skills that can be applied in different contexts is important in itself, the notion of pre-specified, highly generalised competences should not come to dominate the higher education process. There is an unresolved debate over generic versus subject and context specific competences. Higher education is also about preparing people for uncertainty and giving them the confidence and the skill to cope; the acquisition of skills, attitudes and the confidence that will enable graduates to respond to the need for change as the environment in which they work and live changes. There are different views regarding the attempts to provide a generic profile of the graduate. Given the strength of subjects and of the links with disciplinary research, especially in the older universities, it is unlikely that differences between subject-or field-defined competences will be submerged within a common graduate profile. Nevertheless, there is considerable value in the current efforts to define criteria, and thereby to assist in the analysis of objectives in teaching and the assessment of the quality of learning.

### ***Efficiency and Effectiveness***

By comparison with most systems, the U.K. is highly efficient. There is a relatively short first degree, with high rates of completion in the minimum time. However, while student failure and dropout are not of significant proportions, they do seem to be edging up a little and, as access increases, experience from other countries suggests the problem will grow. In common with all other systems reviewed, it is not possible to make conclusive statements about completion rates. Data on student progression are inadequate. Care is needed to maintain the objective of very high success rates. That institutions are becoming more aware of the problem was made clear to us in our visits.

Good teaching of undergraduates continues to be seen as a career goal of university teachers. There have been many initiatives to recognise, support and strengthen teaching and there have been significant innovations. Nevertheless there is room for improvement; for example students need clear guidance on expected learning outcomes and there could be a greater spread of more practical work in assessment of student performance. The teaching career (as distinct from research) is still not sufficiently recognised in the selection and advancement of university teachers. Further, there is an unresolved issue over the relationship of teaching to research. With the abolition of the binary line, a research culture is becoming stronger in the former polytechnics. But, what about higher education provided in further education colleges? Is there a qualitative difference between research-based and non research-based institutions in regard to first degrees? We received no clear information or ideas on this. Much of the higher education provision in the further education sector is of two years' duration, either for a Higher National Diploma or as part of a degree course completed in a university. This does not mean that the

issue of a nexus of research-teaching does not arise, but that particular conditions apply in the further education sector. Perhaps the only common ground is that all higher education teaching is or should be research-aware or research-related, that curricula should embody research findings and that teachers should be active scholars, au fait with current knowledge and thinking in their subjects. It is not the case that even in the most prestigious universities all teachers of undergraduates are currently active researchers; nor, in the published views of some eminent academics and institution leaders, need they be. But the research-teaching relationship does call for closer consideration especially in the further education sector and in the newer universities where research profiles are still being developed.

## ***Costs and Financing***

The reviewers in their visits were made fully aware of the problems of higher education finance in the U.K.. While the financing arrangements to date have served the students, the institutions and the country well, they seem no longer sufficient as growth in the sector continues. It was frequently put to us that the institutions are suffering from significant "underfunding". Funding is relative to purposes: even cheaper higher education could be provided. But would it be of a kind that is widely accepted or useful? Greater efficiencies are possible. But would they be sufficient to compensate for a diminution of the quality of the learning experience? While supporting the case for further innovation and even for greater efficiency, we have stated our agreement with those who say that more resources are needed. A number of options are being canvassed of which direct payment of fees by students is one; various proposals are currently being advanced and the reviewers encourage close analysis of them with reference to international experience -- as will doubtless be happening in the course of the Dearing Inquiry. The issues of affordability and equity are important as is that of ensuring that there are not disincentives to study. Simply to introduce fees or other financial burdens for students and families without regard to context and likely consequences would be quite unrealistic. On the other hand, unless increased priority can be given to public funding of higher education, increased private contributions of some sort seem inescapable and there are other arguments (equity) supporting it.

## **Conclusion**

Tertiary education in the U.K. continues to undergo a wide range of changes. They challenge policy makers, the institutions, interest groups and not least the students to show a heightened capacity to respond to new challenges and seek new opportunities. The reviewers have been very impressed by the strengths of the system and by its responsiveness. At the same time, they have noted a number of issues which will benefit from further attention in various partnerships, collaborative arrangements and co-ordinated activity.

There is very considerable evidence of a new entrepreneurial spirit in the institutions including a readiness to innovate and to develop more complex and open relationships with the environment whether local, regional, national or international. We note that much is being done or is envisaged for students, and think rather more effort might be put into policy frameworks and pathways in which students are working their way through the various options available, thereby eliciting different responses from institutions and the system. This is the model of active students, choosing and discriminating and to a large extent making their own structures -- a model which seems consistent with the changing employment market for graduates where initiative, self-employment and well managed career change have become of crucial importance.

The system is displaying great flexibility. Trends in course modularisation, increased choice in course selection, independent study, work experience, together with a growing emphasis on self-directed study drawing on new technology resources point in positive directions. Such developments underline the need for student guidance and tutorial support and for improved forms of student assessment to assist in defining options, identifying useful information sources, and in the appraisal of progress in learning.

Consistent with this approach, but the subject of intense debate, is the need for a move towards the financing of student learning as distinct from teaching. A student focus gives attention to all costs of study, as well as all resources available to meet them. Students are, perforce, increasingly combining study with work, whether a "full time" or as an acknowledged part-time student. The overall living

conditions under which students study are important and need to be assessed as part of broader policies towards meeting costs and financing the continuing expansion of tertiary education which, on all sides, it is agreed is needed.

Not all teaching is, need, can or should be undertaken by conventional, face-to-face means as within the academic institutions. Possibilities for distance education, in which the U.K. has enjoyed signal success, in meeting student learning needs could be further explored. We anticipate a further blurring of the old distinctions between full-time, on-campus face-to-face and part-time, off-campus by a variety of distance modes and technologies. There is at times a tendency in the enterprise sector to tell higher education what it needs to do. This could be complemented by shared efforts to redefine the base of learning within enterprises, and in so doing increase the role some of them already play to good effect.

U.K. higher education has had and continues to exercise a world influence and many of its practice are of great interest to other countries. Although its priorities remain national, it is increasingly part of a fast-moving international environment. Student and staff mobility including the phenomenon of fee paying overseas students are part of this but there are many dimensions which in the review visit we were not able to explore. U.K. participation in and influence on the thematic review serves as one way of drawing out that international context. From the perspective of the students, it will be important that institutional provision and practice foster a strong international outlook and help to equip the graduates to play a wide variety of roles in the new European and global environments.

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