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University Autonomy in the age of marketisation

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Introduction

University autonomy (UA) is a means of enabling the higher education (HE) sector to respond effectively to a rapidly changing set of demands from a broad range of stakeholders whilst ensuring that they fulfil their mission as key components of national innovation systems. Societal expectations include: the delivery of highly-skilled graduates who will be prepared to serve the demands of the “knowledge economy”; R&D outputs leading to technological innovation and commercial utility; and an attractive learning environment which meets the needs of increasing numbers of domestic and international students. UA can therefore be interpreted as freedom from government interference so that higher education institutions (HEIs) can pursue their own strategic priorities and allocate resources according to their geographical location and market segment. However, since government intervention usually takes the form of providing direct income and a strong regulatory framework, full autonomy of universities might entail both a lighter regulatory environment and more pressure for HEIs to diversify their income streams to make up for reduced direct government funding. This model is generally supported by private sector stakeholders, who see it as a means to open up this area of the public sector to the markets (McGettigan 2013; Lee 2014), and by prestigious HEIs such as many of those belonging to the ‘Russell Group’ (www.russellgroup.ac.uk/), that already show the greatest diversity in revenue sources (McGettigan 2013, 117), and who therefore expect to benefit from these kinds of reforms to the sector (Brown and Carasso, 2013). From this perspective marketisation can be seen as

an end in itself enabling private providers to capitalise on the deregulation and unbundling of services traditionally provided by public sector universities. It is therefore worth reflecting on the purposes served by UA since this cannot be seen as an end in itself.

In this chapter, the authors link the notion of UA to the marketisation of higher education in England with a focus on three separate, but overlapping thematic areas which are principally shaped by the three corresponding interfaces introduced in this volume: funding and finances (government-university interface); academic freedom (university management-faculty interface); and the international context (university-internationalisation interface). A close analysis of these three areas of the English higher educational landscape reveals that certain ‘quasi-market’ mechanisms have been adopted by successive UK governments to help them achieve broader social and economic aims. However, the authors suggest that, without a clear focus on the social purpose of universities, there is a danger that UA will be the Trojan Horse of the free market, that is, a gift (freedom from government interference) which will expose them to market forces beyond their control, and constrain their ability to take optimal long-term decisions. The focus of this chapter will be the Higher Education sector in England, although for historical reasons, reference will sometimes be made to the UK where HE policy has treated the UK as a single entity.

The UK on the UA “scorecard”

UA clearly consists of a complex set of interrelated components, and there have been a number of attempts to operationalise these for the purposes of empirical research. In 2009, the European University Association (EUA) published an exploratory study (Estermann and Nokkala 2009) of 33 national HE systems using four aspects outlined in the

Lisbon Declaration, 2007: organisational, financial, staffing, and academic. The conceptual clarity of this framework enabled the authors (Estermann, Nokkala and Steinel 2011) to create a UA “scorecard”, now available as an electronic tool (EUA 2014), showing how each country compares with the others across each of the four elements. UK universities rank amongst the top three out of 29 countries in each of these four aspects and are therefore considered to be “exceptionally autonomous”. This is particularly the case in England, which is also considered by Brown and Carrasso (2013, 98) as “almost a textbook case of a transition from a ‘non-market’ towards a market-based system.”

However, although the EUA scorecard can be seen as a useful analytical tool, it also has a number of limitations. Firstly, the conceptual clarity of the framework’s underlying theoretical foundation is overly simplistic and underplays the diversity of analytical approaches toward UA taken by various authors who have sought to build more complexity into their work. These range from studies which have put a strong emphasis on organisational structures and human resource management (Felt and Glanz 2002) to those that have emphasised academic freedom (Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly 2006; International Association of Universities 1998; 2012; Schmidt and Langberg, 2008).

Secondly, as an outcome of a largely quantitative approach, the EUA scorecard might be seen as portraying UA as a fixed state of affairs rather than an outcome of dynamic political and transactional struggle between various stakeholders within a continually shifting environment. From the latter perspective, the state of UA in any given country at any given point in time will be the result of strategic negotiation in which local, regional, national, and international actors seek to achieve their respective rational objectives within specific social and historical contexts.

A third shortcoming of the scorecard is that it fails to indicate the direction of travel. For example, it is often assumed that the challenges to UA appear to emanate from the efforts of national governments to control universities' internal procedures and/or curricular content through funding and quality control mechanisms in order to ensure accountability for the services they deliver to society. In this conception, the struggle for UA is one in which universities gradually shake off the yoke of government interference in order to pursue their own objectives in the competitive market of higher education. However, even from this dynamic perspective, there are differing opinions on the direction of travel (Tapper and Salter 1995), with some commentators (e.g., Eustace 1982) concluding that both institutional autonomy and the academic autonomy of faculty have increased in the post-war period, and others (e.g., Russell 1993) judging that the autonomy of HEIs and faculty have been curtailed by the policies implemented by successive governments. In relation to the recent policy changes in England, McGettigan questions whether UA in the form of exposure to market pressures is really in the interests of the public benefit since "public interest may be sacrificed for revenue streams, or 'demand-led' decision-making" (McGettigan 2013, 124). Brown and Carasso (2013, 135) suggest that the new competitive environment is likely to reduce the ability of individual institutions to pursue specialist provisions and will therefore lead to "a system that is more vertically than horizontally diverse". Cribb and Gewirtz also express concern for institutional and academic identities and conclude that the recent emphasis on marketing and institutional competition makes universities "look, feel and act like countless other non-educational institutions" (Cribb and Gewirtz 2013, 344).

Finally, the scorecard approach seems to infer that the highest-scoring countries exhibit the most favourable characteristics, and that, in seeking to improve their own

systems, other countries would be well advised to imitate the policies of the high scorers. However, this would be to ignore the messy nature of policy-making, and particularly the ways in which policies are continually being reviewed and modified as governments become aware of the impact of earlier policies. It has been suggested (Brown 2011; Foskett 2011) that marketisation is usually promoted by governments in pursuit of the expansion of the sector, increased efficiency, and a reduction of the burden on public finances. However, the relative freedom from government interference exposes universities to a number of external pressures to which they may be ill-equipped to respond, or which might lead to perverse consequences as university managers seek to increase the revenue of their institutions by adapting to the demands of external agents (Moutsios 2012). UA certainly makes university managers ultimately responsible for their institutions' survival as well as their operational effectiveness, but the increased responsibility does not automatically entail enhanced managerial autonomy. In particular, some university managers may find it difficult to balance their institutions' long-term strategic objectives with the need to give immediate responses to fluctuations in market forces.

The recent comparative analysis of UA in five EU member states (UK, Denmark, Sweden, Lithuania, and Romania), carried out in the EUniAM project (EUniAM 2014) with the aim of advising the Moldovan government on their implementation of UA policies, sought to overcome these limitations. Using a mixed method approach, including focus groups and interviews, as well as a thorough structural and procedural analysis within the context of each country, this study offers a number of policy alternatives which might suit the social and historical environment of Moldova, rather than holding up a single "model of good practice" as exhibited by high scoring cases. In particular, it was expected that a detailed analysis of the contexts of the two more recent EU member states (Lithuania and

Romania) might offer a useful counter to the other three. Furthermore, although the scorecard ranks the UK as exhibiting the highest levels of UA, it is clear that there is significant variation amongst the HE systems of the UK nations. For example, regarding the dependence of HEIs on government teaching grants, in 2012, English HEIs received support for the so-called Band A and B subjects (clinical and laboratory-based), but nothing at all for other subjects. By contrast, tuition fees, currently £9000 per year in England, are non-existent in Scotland and much lower in Wales and Northern Ireland so that HEIs in those countries still depend on subsidies from their devolved assemblies. Another difference with respect to the case of England is the presence of 140 alternative (private) providers who are able to recruit students eligible for government-backed student loans (NAO 2014). This has led to a huge growth of the numbers of students claiming loans in England (from 7,000 in 2010/11 to 53,000 in 2013/14), with much smaller numbers in the other three UK nations.

Funding and Finances

Perhaps the single most important source of leverage exercised by governments over universities is the funding mechanism. According to the EUA's (2014) scorecard, the UK currently ranks third to Luxembourg and Estonia in terms of autonomy over their finances. This relatively high level of autonomy seems to have been arrived at after a century during which a number of differing funding models have been tried out by successive governments with differing ideological and economic convictions. From 1945, the state took on full responsibility for funding universities as part of its general economic recovery programme, a position defended by the University Grants Commission (UGC) as "less injurious to academic independence than relying entirely on municipal contributions and private benefactions"

(Tapper and Salter 1995, 62). Clearly, the tense relationship between the funding mechanism and UA was recognised very early on in the modern history of UK universities.

In 1963, the “Robbins Report” (Committee on Higher Education 1963) very clearly linked HE with national economic priorities by calling for a rapid expansion of university places to enhance social mobility and to improve the skill levels of the British workforce. Although this linkage was not seen as problematic in a period which saw the creation of a number of new universities and polytechnics, the context changed dramatically as a result of the economic crises in the 1970s, and, particularly, from 1981 onwards, when the UGC was forced to impose cuts in recurrent grants. At this time the funding for teaching and research was split, with the latter being subjected to periodic competitive evaluation exercises. This change enabled governments to exercise considerable influence over academic affairs by allocating extra funding for teaching and research in fields which were considered as corresponding to national economic priorities, particularly engineering, technology, and IT. These changes clearly reflected the contemporary government’s view that HE had not performed an effective service to the needs of the UK economy, a view which was famously presented in the Ruskin College speech by Prime Minister James Callaghan in 1976 in which the purpose and success of UK education were debated:

“I have been concerned to find out that many of our best trained students who have completed the higher levels of education at university or polytechnic have no desire to join industry. Their preferences are to stay in academic life or to find their way into the civil service. There seems to be a need for more technological bias in science teaching that will lead towards practical applications in industry rather than towards academic studies.” (Callaghan 1976)

This speech is widely seen as preparing the ground for successive UK governments, particularly the Conservative governments between 1979 and 1997, to restructure the HE sector and introduce market mechanisms “to ensure the UK economy would be highly competitive in global markets” (Foskett 2011, 29).

Funding HE in England

The new Higher Education Funding Council for England, which was set up in 1993, enabled the government to develop a relationship with universities which could be described as contractual: universities were paid for the services they provided to the government and the price reflected the quality of those services as assessed by universities’ compliance with the government’s stated economic priorities or the quality of their research outputs. An example of this is the way the provision of extra places in technical subjects was rewarded through extra public funding. On the other hand, in a period in which governments considered that the state had to be rolled back in order not to “crowd out” the private sector, universities were encouraged to become less dependent on public funding, e.g., by charging tuition fees, whilst governments maintained overall control of the amount of money they received by capping student numbers and dictating the maximum level of those fees.

The rapid expansion of university places offered to school leavers, and the granting in 1992 of university status to all HEIs which had until then been known as “polytechnics”, produced a clear divide between teaching-led HEIs and the more established and elite institutions which have access to research funding in addition to remuneration in exchange for teaching (Foskett 2011). Universities were encouraged to behave increasingly like for-profit business organisations and to find alternative income streams by attracting greater

numbers of international students and postgraduate students, whose fees were not subject to capping. To increase their capacity, universities were expected to raise finance through private loans from banks or other sponsors, or through public private partnership (PPP) arrangements such as sale and lease arrangements. This period then saw a mixture of autonomous financial arrangements and strong government steer in terms of supply side.

The period from 1997 into the following decade (the Labour government period) saw a continuation of the policies of privatisation and marketisation, with the tripling of tuition fees for undergraduate students to £3000 and universities increasingly looking to international HE markets to make up the shortfall in teaching grants. These policies culminated in a high degree of marketisation of English universities with public funding for the teaching of certain subjects being gradually withdrawn and replaced by fee income raised from government-backed student loans. The second tripling of undergraduate tuition fees to a maximum of £9000 was approved by a snap vote in the House of Commons on 9 December 2010 without any introduction of new primary legislation. Higher fees came into effect in 2012 and further reduced public spending on higher education, with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) teaching grant contribution amounting to little more than 20% of the total by 2014, down from about 65% in 2010 (UUK 2012).

This review of the funding and financial arrangements of English universities has revealed a complex evolutionary process in which government intervention has often been represented as a threat to UA, whilst at the same time being fundamental to the growth of mass HE. The gradual introduction of market mechanisms has been pursued as a means of reducing public expenditure and enhancing the responsiveness of universities to global market forces, particularly the global demand for English-language HE. However, a number of challenges have become evident since the implementation of what Foskett (2011) calls

the “quasi-market” model. Firstly, the cost of covering defaults on student loans is increasing at a rate which is unsustainable. The Student Loans Company, set up as a government-owned agency to provide cheap loans enabling students to pay for their tuition fees and maintenance, has been criticised for failing to reduce public spending since the high default rate means that the current system of funding is actually costing the public purse almost as much as under the £3000 tuition fee regime: “It has become an indefensible system” (Byrne 2014). Attempts by the government to sell the student loan book have been abandoned (Morgan 2014) as prospective buyers demanded that their profits should be guaranteed by government undertakings.

A second challenge comes from the deregulation of the sector with the aim of inviting for-profit organisations to handle certain “unbundled” services such as recruitment or overseas and distance teaching services, or to be alternative providers of higher education courses in competition with universities. The problem here arises from the essential conflict of interests between profit and quality, and the inability of certain universities to control the unethical practices of private partners who have a keener interest in maximising their profits than in protecting the longer-term reputation of their partners. Examples of this kind of ‘market failure’ are given in the recent investigation by the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills into financial support for 11,000 students at alternative higher education providers (NAO, 2014), which discovered dropout rates over five times higher than the sector average, promises of financial support to which students were not eligible (up to 50% of those investigated), students who were not registered with their qualifications’ awarding bodies (20%), and many cases of enrolment onto unapproved courses. A detailed case study by McGettigan (2014) supports these findings with further evidence of unscrupulous marketing tactics conducted by agents chasing ambitious

recruitment targets. Since some of these alternative providers and two of England's private universities are owned by large US parent companies, it is also worth noting the findings of an investigation by the US Senate (2012) into the financial dealings and operations of five private US educational institutions with franchising partnerships around the world. This investigation also found evidence of aggressive sales tactics used by professional recruiters, unacceptably high levels of academic failure, and excessive rates of default on loan repayments. These institutions were found typically to spend twice as much on marketing as on teaching and learning, and to be overwhelmingly dependent on state-provided student loans for their profits. At the very least these cases suggest that the marketisation of HE in England carries substantial quality risks.

This brief review of the post-war period indicates that the financial autonomy of English universities is not an entirely recent feature of the sector, and, over the years, it has enabled them to supplement what has always been considered a relatively sparse amount of public funding with alternative income streams. University managers have generally attempted to ensure the creditworthiness of their institutions in order to call on funds in the form of private loans to increase building capacity and expand staffing numbers. On the other hand, the withdrawal of public funding has led to an increase in the proportion of private sector investment in universities, reflecting a view of universities as for-profit business organisations at the service of a wide range of public and private stakeholders.

Academic freedom

For some commentators, academic freedom is a necessary condition for a liberal society and is essential for universities to fulfil their purpose. In defining academic freedom, the Global Colloquium of University Presidents (GCUP 2005), stated:

“Academic freedom may be defined as the freedom to conduct research, teach, speak, and publish, subject to the norms and standards of scholarly inquiry, without interference or penalty, wherever the search for truth and understanding may lead.”

As Hägg (2009) points out, although universities are dependent on government bodies, business organisations, and other sources for financial support, it is important that this support is not given with ties that negatively affect university autonomy. Indeed, as the GCUP statement makes clear: “The autonomy of universities is the guarantor of academic freedom in the performance of scholars’ professional duties” (Hägg 2009).

Within the English context, it has been noted that there has been a gradual withdrawal of state interference in the shape of direct public funding of teaching, and this could be expected to lead to an increase in the level of academic freedom of universities. On the other hand, mass higher education has been promoted in order to boost the UK’s global competitiveness: “The state saw in higher education the vehicle for assisting its wider plans for reshaping the UK economy and its human capital” (Löscher 2004, 29). The link between the missions of universities and the state’s wider economic ambitions is clearly very strong and accountability requirements are one overt mechanism through which the state exerts control and indirectly constrains academic freedom. One way in which this has been achieved is through the creation of ‘subject benchmark statements’ by the UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), against which courses are periodically reviewed. University mission statements are also required to refer to economic priorities, and to specify the relevance of their academic provision to students’ career opportunities, thus creating a further set of standards to which individual academic departments must conform.

The result has been an increasing emphasis on vocational subjects and the increasing use of a vocational discourse within traditionally non-vocational classes. The latter is particularly evident in the ways in which students are referred to as customers, with the consequences that students become increasingly distanced from the education process and the purpose of education becomes trivialised (Maringe 2011). HEFCE's Key Information Sets seem to confirm this by putting great emphasis on the use of satisfaction indicators such as the National Student Survey (NSS) and the Destinations of Leavers from HE survey (HEFCE 2014). One danger in this tendency is that teaching will be geared towards increasing recorded student satisfaction and other scores which contribute to university ranking tables, rather than delivering a curriculum based on broader academic principles.

A further move in this direction can be seen as a result of the way in which research funding is allocated on a competitive basis through the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), introduced in 1986, which after 2008 is known as the Research Excellence Framework (REF). This is a periodic exercise in which universities compete for funding by submitting research outputs that are grouped into subject areas and then evaluated using a standard set of criteria relating to outputs (originality, significance, and rigor), impact (reach and significance), and environment (vitality and sustainability) (REF, 2014). These competitive events shape each department's and each university's approach to research by constraining their willingness to deploy resources on research which is unlikely to be submitted for evaluation. These exercises have been criticised for their "competitive, adversarial and punitive spirit" (Elton 2000), but, more importantly, for being "restrictive, flawed, and unscientific" (Williams 1998). In particular, they are seen as requiring an unjustifiable allocation of resources (Elton 2000) and for being "a primary means of concentrating resources for research in a relatively small number of universities" (Barker 2007).

It can be seen that the introduction of a highly marketised system has radically altered the dynamics on all three of the interfaces discussed here. The combination of reduced state support and increased economic accountability appears to result in a concentration on vocational subjects for teaching and an instrumental approach to research in which the pursuit of funding is the overriding aim. In this environment it might be considered that academic freedom is the most fragile of the four aspects of UA.

The international context

English universities have been engaged in the relatively unrestricted recruitment of international students for a long time and the comparatively high tuition fees for these students have provided important sources of income. In recent years, the university-internationalisation interface has become even more important as cheaper transportation and communication technologies have given universities the potential to reach large overseas markets and provide a variety of modes of delivery depending on local demand conditions. A number of different models of trans-national education (TNE) have been used to participate in the global market for HE, including campuses abroad (e.g., the University of Nottingham's campus in Ningbo, PRC), franchised courses delivered abroad by local partners, twinning arrangements whereby students study part of their programme in each country, and articulation agreements through which students join programmes at English universities with advanced standing.

However, overseas activities pose a number of significant challenges. Firstly, universities face the financial risks which typically accompany investment in overseas activities. Unless universities have the resources to plough into overseas investments of a large scale and scope, the intricacies of administering some of the TNE models may strain

their infrastructure without resulting in particularly impressive revenues. Secondly, franchised and validated provision can pose severe quality and reputational risks to universities as failures are often given a very high profile in the national press. Thirdly, differences related to national academic systems, pedagogic approaches, and academic qualification frameworks often require specific types of expertise and flexibility which may test administrative systems which have been designed for domestic students.

Commenting on the global demand for English-speaking higher education, Universities UK (2012) expect higher education export earnings for the whole of the UK to increase from around £8 billion in 2010 to around £17 billion by 2025. This growth is dependent on a favourable policy climate (a restrictive visa regime might threaten this), and on the UK's ability to maintain the attractiveness of its universities despite the development of mass higher education systems in emerging economies, such as China, India, and Nigeria, that currently send large numbers of students to the UK. Whilst representing important new income streams for UK universities, these models also have a significant longer-term impact by providing a loyal base of university-educated managers around the world with important cultural ties to the UK.

Conclusion

This analysis of three areas of UA in the English HE sector indicates that the interfaces generally associated with them are parts of more complex networks of relationships. The government-university relationship, which still dominates the area of funding and finance in many parts of the world, has been changed in England by the rapid growth of alternative (private) stakeholders and the almost complete substitution of teaching grants by student fees. Whilst the existence of a competitive 'quasi-market' has

been a fact since the recognition of former polytechnics as universities, alternative providers have brought a more aggressively commercial feature to the English HE landscape. Furthermore, the replacement of teaching grants by student fees has produced a demand-led approach in which HEIs spend an increasing proportion of their resources establishing their brand and defending their 'market share' (Bradley 2013; Chapleo 2011). However, high levels of government intervention have been employed to bring about this new marketised HE environment, not least the provision of student loans and a quality assurance regime which are not seen as barriers to new entrants to the sector.

A closer look at the area of academic freedom also reveals the effects of market mechanisms in the university-faculty interface. Here again, we stress the importance of maintaining clear perspectives on the social purpose of universities if market mechanisms are not to lead to dysfunctional behaviour in which faculty are forced to pursue exclusively those areas of teaching and research which will lead to the highest levels of income for the universities.

The university-internationalisation interface is becoming increasingly important as UA enables universities to supplement their income by seeking alternative income streams in international HE markets. As with other market sectors, there is a danger that lack of accountability will allow certain players, particularly large international organisations, to resort to abusive practices characteristic of unregulated markets. On the other hand, internationalisation provides home students and faculty with opportunities to refocus their attention, and forces universities to consider alternative perspectives and adopt innovative forms of delivery which are changing the face of HE.

On balance, it seems that the antithetical relationship between fully-marketised and centrally-planned models reflects a range of philosophical positions over the purpose of HE.

It has been suggested (Dodds 2011) that the debate in England has almost exclusively adopted positive economic concepts which are predicated on a view of HE markets as being populated by individual consumers and providers. This may have underplayed the extent to which HE forms an integral part of the 'national innovation system', which requires organisational stability to serve broader social priorities. Dodds also indicates that the lack of institutionalist concepts in the debate may have disguised the way in which certain HEIs have been complicit in supporting policies that have not necessarily served longer-term societal needs. In particular, certain HEs have been able to concentrate large proportions of funding available to support research and the teaching of clinical and laboratory-based subjects whilst the majority have become 'teaching-only' institutions (Brown 2013). The case of English HE seems to present a picture of both high levels of university autonomy and radical marketisation. It is the view of the authors that one should not necessarily lead to the other, and that this analysis should make government and institutional policy makers cautious of assuming that national systems displaying the highest levels of UA, according to the EUA's scorecard system, should be taken as reference points.

It might also be argued that 'marketisation', although perceived to be a product of autonomy, has itself diminished the autonomy of many HEIs. The analysis in this chapter suggests that whilst universities are increasingly engaging with the market in order to fund research and teaching, it may be the case that the 'market', rather than the university, is effectively establishing the agenda in both research and teaching. Universities which have high prestige and independent wealth (endowments), e.g. many of those belonging to the Russell Group, may be able to shape, change or dictate the terms of engagement. However, the extent to which this applies across the sector is an area for further enquiry which might

produce useful evidence by which to evaluate the benefits and drawbacks of the marketisation process.

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