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The Unification of the UK Higher Education System: Consequences

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Plan of presentation

Setting the scene

- Typology of HE systems
- Diversity - & stratification
- Holy Grail of ‘tech’

UK as a case study

- Origins & development of binary system 1966-1992
- Pros & cons of unified system 1992 -

Concluding remarks

1. Setting the scene

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Typology of HE systems

- Binary / dual systems: France, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, England (before 1992)
- 'Unified' systems: Sweden (since 1960s), England (since 1992)
- Stratified systems: most US States (often three-tier: community colleges, 4-year colleges, research universities)

BUT no 'pure' forms / each national system distinctive

Diversity and/or hierarchy

- Diversity / differentiation constant policy themes…
- …but at what level - between types of institution, individual institutions, within institutions?
- Differentiation of missions <<>> status hierarchy
- University sector normally the most prestigious - but not always (*grandes écoles*)
- Magnetic attraction of US research university (reinforced by global rankings?)

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Holy Grail of ‘tech’

- National growth / innovation / research strategies’ (narrow?) focus on advanced technologies
- Ubiquity of ‘tech’ titles (at ‘elite’ level, eg E**T**H, Ėcole Poly**tech**nique, **Tech**nical Universities, RMI**T**..) and ‘alternative’ level, eg poly**tech**nics (England), **Tech**nological Universities (Ireland)

2. England (UK) as case study

Polytechnics: origins

- Second go: Colleges of Advanced Technology (CATs) 1956-1963
- Like CATs:
  - Concentration of advanced courses to produce stronger institutions (mergers of colleges of technology, art and - later - education.
- Unlike CATs:
  - Polytechnics remained under local government control (until 1987), ie not ‘autonomous” like universities
  - Greater overlap with universities in subject range (not just engineering / technology)

Polytechnics: development

- Five dimensions of ‘binary policy’
  - Vocational / professional orientation
  - Flexible course structures / study patterns (modules, part-time, credit…)
  - Radical / ‘people’s universities’
  - ‘Public’ not ‘autonomous’
  - Local / regional (community based)
- Degree-awarding (up to PhDs) - *de facto* from start (through CNAA), *de jure* after mid-1980s
- Rapid student growth (social sciences, business and management, IT and computing, health…) - especially after ’displacement’ of students following 1981 university cuts

Polytechnics: endgame

- Growth of national level governance / funding (initially in partnership with local government - NAB - then centralised - PCFC)
- Convergence between polytechnics and universities (scale, subject mix, organisational structures / cultures) - but all one-way, ie 'academic drift'
- Between 1987 and 1992 two 'parallel' national systems - duplication / lack of coordination
- Unified system(s) created in 1992:
  - Informal distinction maintained between 'pre-1992' and 'post-1992' universities >> 'mission groups'
  - Separate Scottish and Welsh HE systems
  - Still 'other' institutions - HE / FE colleges, more recently 'alternative providers', ie private / for-profit institutions (in England)

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Success or failure?

SUCCESS

- Polytechnics still ‘exist’ as ‘post-1992’ universities (large / majority? component of university sector, status enhanced)
- ‘Pre-1992’ universities adopted many ‘polytechnic’ practices, eg modular degrees, more flexible delivery, more professional education

FAILURE

- Erosion of localism (national system, loss of local ‘ownership’)
- (Functional) pluralism undermined by (status) hierarchy - ‘best universities’ & the ‘rest’
- ‘Academic drift’ (research? professional identities…)

Conclusions

1. Tensions between 'history' / particularity & common dynamics of massification
2. Sectoral segmentation (rigid? hierarchical? 20th-century?) and/ or institutional differentiation (adaptable? 21st-century?)
3. All institutions have become more internally differentiated (scale, socio-economic change, disciplinary dynamism…)
4. But systems also always developing / endlessly diversifying (new types of institutions, modes of delivery, credentials…)