

UK higher education today and the place of internationalisation

By Michael Worton

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The UK higher education (HE) sector is one of the most mature and developed in the world. In particular, the UK's research performance is extremely strong: with just 1% of the world's population, the UK produces 5% of its science and it publishes over 12% of all cited papers. It is also a very diverse HE sector. However, for historical reasons, it is not immediately simple to understand. For instance, there are four jurisdictions (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), each with its own Higher Education Funding Council, and there are marked differences between them, e.g. the matriculating qualification in Scotland, Scottish Highers, are taken one year earlier than A levels in England, and Scottish undergraduate degrees normally last four years, whereas the norm in England, Wales and Northern Ireland is three years, although there are now a growing number of four year undergraduate Masters degrees, such as the MEng (Master of Engineering). A formal difference is made between "universities", i.e. those institutions which have a full university title, and "Higher Education Institutions" (HEIs), which includes universities, university colleges, specialist HEIs and other HE colleges. Even this distinction is not simple, however, since some members of the University of London both have and exercise their own degree awarding powers, have a Charter from the Privy Council and are completely autonomous in their governance and management.

The number of universities is as follows:

England	89
Scotland	14
Wales	10
Northern Ireland	2
Total	115

If one considers HEIs, the numbers change quite significantly:

England	131
Scotland	19
Wales	11
Northern Ireland	4
Total	165

A further anomaly is the University of London, which is normally counted as one university, which contains 18 "Schools and Colleges", and which includes 3 of the UK's most prestigious universities: the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), Kings College London (LCL) and University College London (UCL). The other large federal university in the UK, the University of Wales, is now to cease to exist as a result of allegations about failure to carry out proper checks on foreign universities accredited by the University to award its degrees. The various institutions which made up the federation will now go their separate ways. While very damaging for Welsh universities, the decision to abolish the University of Wales demonstrates the importance of rigorous quality assurance in the UK. It also reveals some of the risks inherent in international activity that is not properly monitored and governed.

Intro

CampusFrance's REPERES series invites international experts to express their views on mobility issues in France and overseas.

This 15th issue, published on the occasion of the "United Kingdom Day", a seminar organised by CampusFrance in May 2012, has a specific focus on the internationalisation of higher education in the United Kingdom.

British HEIs range from internationally research-intensive universities through to HEIs specialising in teaching and in technical and vocational education. In the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2011-12, four of the top twenty universities globally are British: Oxford, Cambridge, Imperial College and UCL. A significant feature of the last decade has been an increasing focus on the importance of institutional mission and identity.

Several “mission groups” have been set up by universities with shared common interests. These are:

- The Russell Group¹, an association of 24 major research universities of the United Kingdom.
- The 94 Group², made up of 19 UK universities, who agreed in 1994 to form a group, given that they share common aims, standards and values.
- The University Alliance³, formally launched in 2007, consists of HEIs with a balanced portfolio of research, teaching, enterprise and innovation as integral to their missions.
- Million+⁴, a University Think Tank, comprising mainly post-1992 universities.
- The Cathedrals Group⁵, a group consisting of 15 UK member institutions who support the continuing role of the Churches in HE; it works closely with the Church of England, the Roman Catholic Church and the Methodist Church.

Not all universities belong to one of these groups and, conversely, some belong to two groups. Their main function is to share good practice and to function as advocacy groups on issues of national and international HE policy.

Universities UK (UUK)⁶, is the representative organisation for all UK universities, seeking to be the definitive voice for the university sector, to promote both the excellence and the diversity of the UK HE sector, and to serve as an advisory body for the sector.

Facts and Figures

In the decade from 2000-01 to 2009-10, there has been a 28% increase in student numbers from 1,948,135 to 2,493,415. A significant feature here is that while UK students rose by 20.6% over the period, other EU students increased by 39.2% and non-EU students increased by 121.6%. There are now 400,000 students from outside the UK and more than 400,000 studying on a UK HEI programme overseas. The HE sector is thus now one of the UK's most important export earners for the UK economy-and internationalisation has now become a major priority for all UK universities.

Overseas students are a vital part of the student body, both in terms of the cultural diversity that they bring to universities and their cities and in terms of the tuition fee and other income that they bring to the UK. The biggest single cohort by far for undergraduate programmes comes from China (23,990), with the second largest cohort coming from Malaysia (9,915), the fourth from Cyprus (EU) with 7,685, and the fifth, Hong Kong (7,380). France is the sixth largest national cohort, with 7,260 students.

In terms of Taught Masters programmes, the picture is rather different, with India in first place (29,185), followed by China (23,085), Nigeria (9,780), USA (6,035), and Pakistan (5,105). France is in 12th position in this category, with 3,130 students. The fastest growing group of non-EU students in the UK on Taught Masters courses is that of Indian students; this group showed an increase of 189% in enrolments in the five years to 2009/10.

A slightly different picture again is to be found with regard to post-graduate research students, where China again is the largest single national cohort (3,690), followed by the USA (2,725), then Germany (2,340), Malaysia (1,780) and Greece (1,760). In this category, France is again in 12th position, with 940 students. Non-EU students make up 29% of Doctoral students; this is somewhat lower

1- www.russellgroup.ac.uk

2- www.1994group.ac.uk

3- www.unialliance.ac.uk

4- www.millionplus.ac.uk

5- www.cathedralsgroup.org.uk

6- www.universitiesuk.ac.uk

than the percentages for France (35%) and the USA (33%).

Diversity of the student body is very important to the conception and vision that British universities have of themselves; international students are a very important part of this diversity, but just as much attention is paid to diversity in terms of ethnicity, socio-economic class, educational background, etc. And as diversity of all kinds has increased throughout the UK HE sector, universities have been paying ever greater attention to the student experience not only in pedagogical terms but also in terms of the wider socio-cultural experience of students. Within this context, the UK is proud that drop-out rates are relatively low, with the sector average being only 7.9% (and being even lower for the Russell Group universities at 4.2%).

There are currently approximately 387,000 staff in UK HEIs, with 181,000 being academic staff¹. An important feature of UK's academic staff is that it is itself highly international, just as the study body is. The highest number of overseas staff comes from Germany (3,130), followed by the Republic of Ireland (2,410), then the USA (2,380), China (2,280), Italy (1,870) and France (1,850).

Governance

One of the strongest features of UK universities is their autonomy and relative independence from Government. While the Government is, indirectly, a significant funder of universities, through the Funding Councils and the Research Councils, universities are much more masters of their own destinies than universities in many other countries. For instance, it has been made explicit in Education Acts over the years that universities are solely responsible for curricula and for admissions. The UK government can give direction to the Funding Council and the Research Councils in terms of strategic priorities, but the process of allocating research grants, for example, is done by panels of academics themselves, just

as the regular assessments of research, which happen every 5 or 6 years, is again led by academics. In other words, Peer Review is at the heart of the allocation of funding for research.

The Government undoubtedly can and does seek to shape the direction that universities will take, but it also recognises the diversity of mission in the sector and so proposals for change, no matter how radical, necessarily include a dimension of flexibility. For instance, one of the most radical changes in the past 20 years has been the shift by the Coalition Government away from funding universities themselves (via the Funding Councils), to funding students directly through a system of loans operated by the Student Loans Company². In November 2010, the Minister of State for Higher Education, announced that the highest tuition fee chargeable to UK and EU students would be £9,000 per annum. At the same time, funding for teaching through the Funding Councils was eliminated for many subjects (though partially retained for Science, Technology, Engineering and Medicine) and funding for Capital Projects was significantly reduced. The Government had assumed that this decision would create a dynamic market in UK HE and that universities would charge very different levels of tuition fee. However, in Spring 2011, most HEIs decided to charge the maximum of £9,000. The Government consequently responded in June 2011 with the White Paper, *Students at the Heart of the System*³, where it announced relaxation of controls on UK/EU undergraduate student numbers from 2012 for students gaining AAB or more at A Level⁴, whilst also maintaining control over students below AAB, with punitive fines for universities that recruited more than their agreed numbers. It is now possible for HEIs to bid for extra students with less than AAB, but they can do so only if their average fee is no more than £7,500. Loans to students are to be repaid at a level of up to 9% once students have gained employment and are earning more than £21,000 per annum.

1- *The norm for academic staff at UK universities is to be the holder of a Doctorate*

2- www.slc.co.uk

3- <http://c561635.r35.cf2.rackcdn.com/11-944-WP-students-at-heart.pdf>

4- AAB at A Level equates to 14 overall in the French Baccalauréat, AAA at A Level equals 15.

Another feature of the Coalition Government's HE policy is to encourage private providers and to facilitate the entry into the UK HE sector of more private providers, including providers from overseas. The purpose of this from the Government's point of view is to increase competition and thus to drive down the costs of studying, but it has raised significant concerns throughout the sector. There were massive student protests against the new student funding regime, with several universities being occupied by their students and with major demonstrations taking place to protest against the new policies which are seen as heralding an increasing privatisation of UK universities. However, the Government has passed the necessary legislation and the sector has settled down somewhat – and the new student funding approach is certainly fairer to students from the poorer socio-economic classes – and a major benefit brought by the new shift in funding is that the student experience is now placed absolutely at the heart of the work of universities.

Fees for non-EU students remain unregulated by the Government and are determined largely by market forces.

Universities are legally constituted as charities and therefore work operate within the parameters established by the Charities Commission as well as working with the Funding Councils who have certain regulatory responsibilities and with the Quality Assurance Agency, which is charged with working with UK universities to ensure that the highest quality of educational provision is provided. The governing body of a university is typically a Council or Board of Governors, chaired by a lay member, and made up of lay members, representatives of the academic staff and student representatives. The role of students is particularly important in UK university governance, with students represented on the vast majority of committees at university, faculty and departmental level. Students Unions play a key role in the student experience, and they too are constituted as (separate) charities.

Internationalisation and Going Global

The UK has a very strong profile internationally, largely based on its high reputation for research and education and on the profile of its elite top universities (Oxford, Cambridge, LSE, Imperial, UCL). Another major contributor to its global reputation is the strong historical trade and political links with countries around the world – and the popularity of English language study and admiration for British culture.

UK universities recognise that, with globalisation, the world is changing very rapidly and the expectations of students world-wide are changing equally rapidly. Students now increasingly seek opportunities to study in foreign countries, be it for an entire programme, as part of an exchange system, or even just for a short period of study or a Summer School. They also increasingly make a link between their higher education and their employability prospects and expect not only to acquire a variety of high level skills but also to develop networks and gain experience of entrepreneurship. In this context, UK universities have responded by placing internationalisation at the heart of their thinking.

Internationalisation is a term which figures in many mission statements, but, interestingly, it still means different things to different people. For many British universities, there are now two types of internationalisation which run in parallel with each other: internationalisation at home and internationalisation abroad. This duality entails transforming their student experience and, indeed, all university processes at home in the UK, whilst also ensuring ever greater mobility of students and staff overseas, and creating new kinds of partnerships with other universities, business and industry overseas, and with foreign governments.

Many universities are now therefore designing new curricula which meet the needs of an increasingly international and diverse student body, preparing them for careers in the global economy and helping them to develop global perspectives and inter-cultural skills and capabilities.



There is a continued desire to recruit more international students to study in the UK, which remains the most favoured destination after the USA. However, a major feature of the last few years has been the rapid expansion of Transnational Education (TNE) by UK universities. TNE includes the delivery of UK degree programmes, modules, training and other types of education at overseas locations and also via distance learning. TNE also increasingly includes International Branch Campuses (IBCs). There are currently 200 IBCs world-wide offering degree-awarding programmes, with 40 more planned within the next two years. 16 UK universities currently have one or more IBCs; there are currently 26 IBCs established by UK universities, with 5 more planned within the next 3 years. The opportunities provided by such academic ventures are significant. For instance, an overseas campus helps to raise the international profile of the home university and enables it to extend considerably both its impact and its influence in terms of education and research. Given that degree programmes at overseas campuses are often designed from scratch, innovation in curriculum design is facilitated. Furthermore, it is essential that the home university works with the socio-cultural context of the host country and therefore new approaches to the student experience must be developed.

Of course, IBCs represent considerable risks. These are not only financial risks in terms of the revenue needed to maintain the campus and to cover the considerable costs of supporting the IBCs from the home university, but there are significant reputational risks, since failure of an overseas campus would be extremely damaging to a university's reputation for professionalism and excellence in its business practices.

As the world of IBCs develops, different models are being developed by different universities in the UK and beyond, with some opting for large, mainly undergraduate overseas campuses, while others are now taking a "niche" post-graduate and research approach, with yet others engaging in partnership working and collaborative provision with overseas HEIs.

The HE sector will undoubtedly continue to grow within the UK, but TNE provision is likely to grow much more significantly and more rapidly than domestic provision in the UK. TNE developments will increase opportunities for access to higher education around the globe, thereby bringing considerable public benefit. Indeed, it is this dimension which is driving several of the UK's most high-profile overseas campus developments. The drive to set such campuses up comes not only from academic imperatives, but also from social imperatives: an overseas campus can not only bring benefits in terms of higher profile and increased revenues, but can also offer the possibility of working with the host country for social justice and cohesion, especially in developing countries, and of working, through both public engagement and engagement with governments, towards bringing about changes in policy in areas of global significance, such as global health, energy, food security, inter-cultural understanding, etc.

HE in the UK is going through a time of considerable change. The factors determining this change are multiple, arising from political decisions made by the government, including very unhelpful changes to the visa system for both students and staff, from the challenges of the current critical state of UK and European economics, from the rapid developments in technology and scientific thinking, and from social changes both in the UK and globally.

UK universities recognise that whatever their mission and identity, their future must be a global one. Only a small number of UK universities will set up campuses overseas, but all will enter into new types of partnerships with universities, companies and businesses, NGOs and governments abroad. Partnerships are now becoming much more strategic, long-term and sustainable, rather than being opportunistic and short-term, as has been the case in the past. The challenges of HE will continue, but the development of internationalisation and of TNE will undoubtedly lead not only to the expansion of UK HE, but also to radical change in the way that it conceptualises itself and operates, both in the UK and around the world.



◆ Biographical Sketch

Professor Michael Worton



He is Higher Education Advisor to the British Council and he has spoken widely throughout the world on the Internationalisation of HE and the purpose and responsibilities of universities in the 21st century. He was a founding member of the Arts and Humanities Research Board, later the Arts and Humanities

Research Council, on which he served from 1998-2006, chairing several of its major committees. He is also a member of the Comité International de Consultation en Sciences Humaines et Sociales de l'ANR and of the Advisory Board for the Programme of Artistic Research of the Austrian Research Council (FWF). He has been a member of the ERIH Steering Committee since work began on the European Science Foundation's (ESF) European Reference Index for the Humanities (ERIH) project in 2002. In 2009, he undertook a personal review of language provision in higher education for HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) and the UK Government.

He is a Chevalier of the Legion d'Honneur, an Officier of the Ordre des Palmes Académiques and in 2009 was awarded the Medal of Honoured Worker in Higher Education by the Republic of Kazakhstan. He has published 11 books and more than 80 articles and chapters in books.

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