Tribalism and Competitive Branding in (Scottish) Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a description and analysis of recent developments in higher education, taking account of the expansion of the sector, the financial pressures to which it is subject, and the ideological climate in which it operates. It examines the significance of the emergence of various university 'mission groups' or 'think tanks' for the unity and coherence of the sector as a whole. Although the main focus is on Scottish higher education, the analysis makes some reference to UK-wide developments and to global pressures affecting the HE systems of all countries. The effects of corporate culture and competitive branding on the traditional values and purposes of higher education are discussed, and it is argued that there is now a serious divide between university leaders and academic staff. It is also suggested that the current discourse of higher education shifts uneasily between principles that are not readily compatible: excellence and access; quality and inclusion; global reach and community engagement. The need for academics to contribute to wider public debate about the aims of higher education is seen as an important first step in achieving a more coherent role for the sector as a whole.

INTRODUCTION

In March 2010 an article by Andrew McKie was published in The Herald newspaper in which Glasgow Caledonian University was the subject of a number of critical comments (McKie 2010). Reporting on the restructuring of faculties and schools at Glasgow Caledonian, McKie suggested that the new configurations constituted 'a good list of subjects which ought not to be taught in universities'. He went on to draw a familiar distinction between vocational learning and 'the pursuit of pure knowledge', invoking Cardinal Newman's idea of 'the culture of the intellect' in support of the latter (Newman 1907, especially Discourse 7). The author insisted that he recognised the value of vocational courses for society and the economy, but claimed that preparing students for jobs was not the real purpose of higher education. He concluded, provocatively, by suggesting that Glasgow Caledonian should drop the title 'university' and call itself a 'vocational college'. Not surprisingly, there were some robust responses to the article in subsequent letters to the newspaper. One correspondent found the article 'elitist' and 'objectionable'. Another called it 'socially insensitive'. A third

suggested that these reactions obscured 'a more fundamental battle for the soul of higher education', a battle between an 'instrumentalist approach' and 'the traditional liberal model'. The fullest response came from Professor Pamela Gillies, Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the university (in a letter published on March 10, 2010). She described her institution as being 'in the top 10 of modern universities in the UK with a mission which promotes access and excellence'. She also stated that the teaching and learning at Glasgow Caledonian was 'of the highest quality', that support for students was 'award-winning', and that the work of staff included 'areas of world class research'.

At one level this exchange is merely the latest example of ongoing debates about standards in higher education (HE), the comparability of different institutions, the extent to which universities should serve the economy, and the pressures deriving from the vastly increased numbers entering higher education. At another level, however, the episode raises deeper questions about the unity and coherence of the higher education system as a whole, the diverse origins of different institutions and the alliances and rivalries that exist within the sector. Glasgow Caledonian, for example, was until 2009 a member of a group of universities called Million+: the group still has as members three other Scottish universities (Abertay, Napier and West of Scotland). Million+ consists of 'new' institutions (sometimes called 'post-1992' universities) which feel the need to assert their distinctive character and make collective representation to the funding councils to ensure that their particular needs and interests are given fair consideration. There are four other alliances of HE institutions, with different aims and priorities, as well as a number of unaffiliated institutions, and these will be outlined below. The purpose of this paper is to describe and analyse some of the manifestations of both unity and fracture within the HE sector. Particular attention will be given to the situation in Scotland, though it will be necessary to refer at various points to wider developments within the UK as a whole and to acknowledge global trends which are impacting on higher education systems throughout the world. The Scottish situation cannot be properly understood in isolation.

The paper is written from the perspective of someone who has worked in two 'ancient' universities, one institution granted university status in the 1960s and one 'post-1992' university, all in Scotland. The aim is not to praise one type of institution at the expense of others but to interrogate the significance of institutional responses to the many pressures (economic, demographic, political, technological and cultural) which affect all universities. Firstly, some general comments about the changing context of higher education will be offered: this will include reference to those sector-wide arrangements and practices which seem to suggest the continuation of a unified higher education system. Secondly, a contrasting reading of the situation, deriving from the stated aims and activities of the various alliance groups will be developed. The final section will discuss the significance of the preceding analysis, with particular reference to the growing divide

between university management and academic staff, the conceptual integrity of the HE sector, and the potential scope for both deeper understanding and forms of resistance.

THE CHANGING CONTEXT OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The development of higher education in the UK since the 1960s can be characterised in various ways, but three features stand out above all others. The first is the massive expansion of the sector, which has led to a vast increase in the number of undergraduate and postgraduate students, and a related increase in the number of institutions granted universities status: some of these have been new creations, such as Stirling founded in 1967, while others have developed from existing colleges, such as Edinburgh Napier University, which was granted university status in 1992 but has its origins in earlier institutions dating back to 1964. The HE sector in Scotland now consists of 20 institutions (14 universities, the Open University in Scotland, the UHI Millennium Institute, two art schools, one academy of music and drama, and the Scottish Agricultural College).

Paterson (2003) draws a distinction between, on the one hand, the nineteen-sixties and seventies, which he characterises as a period of 'expansion', and, on the other, the nineteen-eighties and nineties, which he describes as the beginning of a period of 'mass higher education'. The number of full-time undergraduate students rose from 52, 315 in 1970 to 143,913 in 2000 (Paterson, 2003: 165). By 2008-09 the total number of students in higher education in Scotland (including postgraduates, those studying part-time and those undertaking sub-degree level courses) had reached 279,615 (Scottish Government, 2010). The Higher Education Statistics Agency compiles figures for the whole of the UK, giving detailed breakdowns by age, gender, school (state/independent), institution, level of study, subject, mode of study (part/full time), place of origin (home/overseas) and socio-economic status (www.hesa.ac.uk)

The second key factor follows from the first. Universities rely heavily on public funds and, as the sector has grown, the demand on the public purse has increased enormously. In times of economic strength, governments of different complexions have been willing to provide the necessary resources, but in times of economic decline universities, in common with other public services, have had to cut back on staffing, on courses and on investment in new facilities. Increasingly, universities have had to justify their existence in terms of their identifiable contribution to skills development, technological advance and economic growth. The Scottish Funding Council (SFC), the body which allocates grants to higher education institutions, has seven strategic priorities: 'employability and skills; access, inclusion and progression; knowledge exchange; specialism and diversity; collaboration; world-class research; and effective colleges and universities' (SFC, 2010). Grants come in two forms: General Fund Grants for teaching and research, and Horizon Funding for strategic initiatives. In 2010-11 the awards to Scottish institutions

totalled £1.13 billion under the General Fund and £129.5 million under the Horizon Fund. Although this represented an increase of 1.4 per cent from the previous year, when inflation is taken into account the figure amounted to a cut of 0.6 per cent. In response, several universities introduced early retirement and voluntary severance schemes to reduce staff numbers. Nevertheless, Scottish institutions fared better than their English and Welsh counterparts during the same period. Wales, for example, faced cuts of 4.3 per cent.

The third factor is the ideological shift signalled by the election of successive Conservative governments from 1979 onwards and continued, in large part, under New Labour until the general election of 2010. Although education is a devolved matter and thus a responsibility of the Scottish Government, it has been subject to the general climate of ideas which has impacted on a wide range of public services across the UK, including local government, health and transport. The effects have been widely researched (e.g. Protherough & Pick 2002; Barnett 2003; Seddon 2008) and the terminology in which the ideological shift is usually described has become very familiar to students of public policy: a culture of managerialism, marketisation, performativity and accountability is often said to have replaced one of trust, professional judgement, self-regulation and relative autonomy (Evans 2002; Furedi 2004; Murphy 2009). Mechanisms for monitoring targets and quality were introduced from the private sector, including stricter financial control, a sharper focus on measurable output, and tighter monitoring of staff performance.

Issues relating to the scale, funding, management and social function of higher education are by no means confined to Scottish or UK universities. A similar pattern can be seen internationally and a number of studies have examined the way in which global economic pressures have altered expectations about the purposes of higher education and the way in which universities should be run. Within Europe, the trend towards greater 'convergence' of educational systems coexists with fears about imposed uniformity and loss of national identity (Mazza *et al*. 2008; van Vught 2009). Worldwide, however, there is a largely unquestioned assumption that the connections between mass higher education systems and economic and national development are self-evident (Bridges *et al*. 2007; Baker & Wiseman, 2008; Trani & Holsworth 2010).

Within UK universities, the gradual shift in political perceptions about their function was reflected in several ways. The relationship between academic departments and 'service' departments began to change. The role of staff in Finance, Planning, Human Resources, Recruitment and Marketing became much more important as institutions were expected to produce well-developed strategies and action plans for the future. A much more 'corporate' approach to management had to be adopted, with a corresponding diminution of scope for academic departments to operate in a semi-autonomous way. Many universities set up Business Schools, supported by funds from the private sector: these were usually housed in attractive (sometimes new) buildings, symbolising the entrepreneurial spirit that was being encouraged. Indeed a case could be made for saying that Business Schools were an important element in the intellectual capture of universities by corporate thinking,

marking a transition of academic staff from scholars to knowledge workers (Deem *et al.* 2007).

For many lecturers and professors these changes have been profoundly unsettling, disturbing their sense of professional identity (Tight 2010). The academic landscape has changed rapidly and in ways that represent a serious challenge to traditional conceptions of the purpose of higher education. As will be shown below, this has led to increasing diversity as different institutions responded in different ways to the pressures of expansion, financial control and political scrutiny. But that both politicians and university leaders remained committed to a unified, national system of higher education is evident not only in the granting of university status to former polytechnics and colleges of higher education, but also in the maintenance and development of institutional structures with responsibility for representing the interests of the sector as a whole, and in the national role of bodies dealing with teaching and research quality. The collective voice of universities is heard through Universities UK (UUK). It has three autonomous national councils covering England and Northern Ireland, Scotland (Universities Scotland) and Wales (Higher Education Wales). The Scottish council of UUK defines its function in these terms: 'Universities Scotland exists to represent and promote Scotland's higher education sector and campaign on its behalf. Through this work, we seek to assist the sector to deliver its essential contribution to the economic, social and cultural needs of Scotland, and to enhance Scotland's international reputation' (www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/).

The quality of teaching is assessed on a UK-wide basis by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2009). It defines its function as 'safeguarding the public interest in the sound standards of higher education qualifications [and] informing and encouraging continuous improvement in the management and quality of higher education' (www.qaa.ac.uk). Parity of standards between universities, it is claimed, is maintained through a system of external examining, whereby academics from one university monitor the work of students in other institutions. The quality of research is assessed against national and international standards on a UK-wide basis through the Research Assessment Exercise (carried out in 2008) and the Research Excellence Framework (planned for 2014). University managements look carefully both at the overall position of their institutions on comparative league tables and at the relative performance of individual disciplines: decisions about the closure of departments or, alternatively, increased investment in particular subjects, are likely to be strongly influenced by this comparative information. The national character of the UK higher education sector is also reflected in the work of the Universities College and Admissions Service (UCAS) which acts a clearing house for applications to the vast majority of undergraduate degree programmes at UK universities and colleges.

These features suggest that it is still meaningful to speak of a unified system of higher education. Yet, as the opening exchanges about Glasgow Caledonian University indicate, there are differing perceptions of the reputation, status and standards of different institutions. It would be hard to deny that

there is a pecking order of universities and a public perception that some are better than others. League tables are compiled by national newspapers in which many factors are taken into account in assessing the overall position of particular institutions: standards of entry; staff-student ratios; completion rates; percentage of first and upper-second class degrees; research income; QAA teaching assessments; RAE rankings; and so on. There are so many variables on which universities might be assessed that it would be hard to reach agreement on any overall judgement that might be made of their respective positions on a league table. Nevertheless, few would argue that the existence of national frameworks for monitoring the work of universities and for representing their collective interests ensures that there is complete equality between them. To adapt Orwell: in the official rhetoric of higher education, all universities are equal - but some are more equal than others.

Once again, this pattern is replicated at an international level. Times Higher Education annually compiles a table of World University Rankings, based on an Academic Reputation Survey, and Principals and Vice-Chancellors eagerly look to see whether their institution has moved up or down the table. A conference of the World 100 Reputation Network took place in Hong Kong in June 2010 to examine the implications for university standings of, among other things, the rapid development of higher education in China and changing patterns of international student mobility. Graham Harper, chair of COLLAB, the global collaboration laboratory, has sought to discover 'what makes a great university' and has concluded 'Being able to see, and act, with a global sensibility, and through an engagement with the universal: that is one element clearly emerging as a trait of a great university' (Harper 2010: 36). There is now an international recruitment market with top academics, like star footballers, moving easily from one nation to another, attracted by high salaries and good research facilities. This raises questions about institutional loyalty and community engagement which rarely receive attention.

A university's reputation will depend on many factors. Ancient universities, such as Oxford and Cambridge in England, or St Andrews, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Edinburgh in Scotland, start at a considerable advantage simply by virtue of their age. Over the centuries they have produced many distinguished graduates, have erected impressive buildings, and have received gifts and benefactions from alumni, many of whom have occupied important positions in government, the professions, business and industry. The last point means that long-established universities have access to networks of power and influence when important funding or policy decisions are being made. Their status also means that they can attract some of the best staff and set high standards of entry for students. They are also likely to have a strong international profile, in the form of collaborative agreements with leading universities in other countries.

In a study of English higher education Malcolm Tight has identified three key elements in the variations between universities: age; location; and strategy. Older universities 'tend to be larger than average, and to have

more postgraduate and non-UK students' (Tight 2007: 21). Newer universities tend to focus on market niches in areas of knowledge which traditional institutions have either not exploited to any extent or have relinquished. They also have a higher proportion of undergraduates and more part-time students. For historical reasons, older universities tend to be located in large cities with considerable opportunities to recruit locally, a factor which is perhaps more noticeable in Scotland where the tradition of attending a local university (particularly in Glasgow) has always been strong (often for economic reasons). In relation to institutional strategy, Tight draws a broad distinction between generalist and specialist approaches. Generalist approaches involve a 'large-scale, multi-faculty, multi-level vision of what most people would understand a university to be' (Tight 2007: 22). Specialist approaches are seen most clearly in colleges which specialise in areas such as art, agriculture or music and drama, but are also evident in newer universities which acquire a reputation in highly specialised fields (such as Abertay and computer games technology).

There is, then, considerable institutional diversity and university leaders sometimes struggle to defend the coherence of the system as a whole. Different institutions give different weight to a variety of principles which are said to underpin their efforts. Some emphasise 'academic excellence,' while others give greater emphasis to 'access', aiming to attract those groups who have been traditionally under-represented in higher education. Some stress links with their local communities while others see themselves as global players at the cutting edge of research. Against this background, the attempt to maintain 'equality of esteem' between the old and the new, the liberal and the vocational, the pure and the applied, is not easy. This is reflected in the emergence of various collaborative groupings which seek to promote the particular interests of certain types of institutions. The next section of the paper describes these groupings and considers their significance.

MISSION GROUPS, THINK TANKS OR GANGS?

In his classic study of academic disciplines, Becher (1989) described the behaviour of university staff working in different intellectual fields as exhibiting tribal and territorial behaviour: 'the tribes of academe . . . define their own identities and defend their own patches of intellectual ground by employing a variety of devices geared to the exclusion of illegal immigrants' (Becher 1989: 24). This comparison can be adapted and applied to the institutional positioning of universities some 20 years after Becher's analysis was first advanced (see also Becher & Trowler 2001). The tribal and territorial behaviour he described now extends beyond single disciplines to the universities as corporate bodies operating in a difficult and sometimes hostile environment. Universities presumably see strategic advantages in their membership of these tribes, which are variously described as mission groups, think tanks or representative organisations. They would doubtless resist any suggestion that they operate as Mafia-style gangs, though, as will be shown below, at least one former university Vice-Chancellor has invoked

that image in describing their activities. There would perhaps be mileage in applying Diego Gambetta's analysis of the conventional and iconic signals of the underworld to the machinations of academic politics, though that is beyond the scope of the present paper (Gambetta 2009).

The most powerful tribe is the Russell Group which describes itself on its website in these terms: 'The Russell Group represents the 20 leading UK universities which are committed to maintaining the very best research, an outstanding teaching and learning experience and unrivalled links with business and the public sector' (http://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/). Two Scottish universities, Edinburgh and Glasgow, are included in its members. According to a report in Times Higher Education, 'it relies heavily on behind-the-scenes influence with the Government' (Newman 2009: 34). Its Director-General, Wendy Piatt, used to work in Tony Blair's strategy unit and other staff members also have strong political connections. At a time of fiscal restraint, involving cutbacks for many universities, the Russell Group clearly recognises the importance of making a persuasive economic case for the sector. It is claimed, for example, that: 'Through their outstanding research and teaching, unrivalled links with businesses and a commitment to civic responsibility, Russell Group universities make an enormous impact on the economic, social and cultural wellbeing of the UK' (http://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/).

Russell Group universities operate on a grand scale: they have large numbers of staff and students, have a high proportion of postgraduates, have sizeable budgets, with significant sources of private or charitable income, do well in securing grants from the UK research councils, and have strong links with comparable institutions in other countries. Size does matter and not all universities can aspire to the capacity of Russell Group members. This helps to explain the rationale for another grouping. The 1994 Group consists of 19 smaller institutions which describe themselves as 'research intensive'. Members include Durham, Exeter, Sussex and York. Only one Scottish university, St Andrews, is represented. The group was formed in 1994 partly in response to the granting of university status to former polytechnics, and this reinforces the perception that strategic positioning within the higher education sector as a whole is a prime motivation of all of players. At the same time the 1994 group is careful to align itself closely with Universities UK. Its Executive Director, Paul Marshall, has stated: 'We work closely with Universities UK. The 1994 Group can magnify the power of [UUK's] collective message through our own lobbying' (quoted in Newman 2009: 37). To describe itself as a 'lobbying organisation' rather than a mission group perhaps represents a realistic sense that its members do not carry the muscle of the 'big beasts' in the Russell Group.

The Million+ group of universities, referred to at the start of this paper, describes itself as a 'think-tank' rather than a mission group. At the time of writing it contains 27 members, including three in Scotland (Abertay, Napier and West of Scotland). The think-tank description is reflected in the group's self-designation as 'an organisation at the forefront of the political debate about the role and contribution of universities to the economy and society'

(http://www.millionplus.ac.uk/). Its Chief Executive has stated: 'There are risks in the sector being divided, and there would be merit in the mission groups and UUK uniting around common causes. However, there are hierarchies in current funding regimes that encourage different priorities. While these remain, interest groups are likely to continue' (quoted in Newman 2009: 35).

University Alliance dates from 1996 and currently has 23 members. On its website it describes the universities which comprise it as 'research-engaged' and 'business-focused' (www.university-alliance.ac.uk/). Its Director, Libby Aston, who was formerly director of research at the Russell Group, has stated that University Alliance institutions are all 'actively engaged in their economic and social environments with close links to the professions and new industries and have a deep-seated commitment to access through flexible provision' (quoted in Newman 2009: 35). They are quite a disparate group: several are former English polytechnics (Manchester Metropolitan, Oxford Brookes, Sheffield Hallam and West of England) but others (Aberyswyth, Glamorgan, the Open University) have a different pedigree, perhaps reflecting the fact that the group started as the Alliance of Non-Aligned Universities, who defined themselves negatively as not belonging to any of the existing groups. Membership has fluctuated with some movement both in and out, again suggesting the strategic nature of the exercise. As universities, particularly the newer ones, seek to define their position in the market and establish a clear identity with a particular portfolio of courses and qualifications, so they may decide to switch from one mission group to another. An interesting example of this was the decision of Glasgow Caledonian University to leave the Million+ group and join University Alliance in 2010 (reported in Times Higher Education, No. 2010, April 22-28: 13). Pamela Gillies, the Principal, gave as the reason a desire to join 'major business-focused universities' at a time when 'our collective impact is crucial'.

GuildHE is rather different from the other groupings. It was set up in 2006 and currently has 21 members, including colleges and institutes with a particular vocational focus (e.g. performing arts, design and communication, agriculture). It specifically states that it is not a mission group but a 'formal representative body' which the government consults when it wants a response to sector-wide issues. Although it contains some universities (e.g. Bucks New, Cumbria, Winchester and Worcester), many of its members are described as university colleges, some of whom may acquire full university status in due course.

A significant number of Scottish universities are unaffiliated to any of the formally constituted pressure groups. They are Aberdeen, Dundee, Heriot-Watt, Queen Margaret, Robert Gordon, Stirling and Strathclyde. The very diverse origins of these universities raises interesting issues. Aberdeen is one of the four 'ancient' Scottish universities dating back to the 15th century and, although it has been making significant progress in national and international league tables, it cannot match Edinburgh or Glasgow in terms of the scale of its operations. The other university based in Aberdeen, Robert Gordon, has been of the most successful of the 'new' universities in

the UK and it has managed to achieve this without feeling to the need to join any of the mission groups or think tanks. Stirling and Strathclyde both date from the 1960s but one was an entirely new foundation while the other had a distinguished prior history as the Royal College of Science. Both have considerable strengths in particular areas but neither would claim that they are equally strong in all the disciplines covered by their teaching and research. Strathclyde, under a new Principal, is currently repositioning itself, concentrating particularly on its traditional areas of science and technology and aiming to become 'A Scottish Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)'. Ironically, perhaps the most distinguished scholar at MIT is not a scientist or an engineer but the linguist, philosopher and cultural theorist, Noam Chomsky. Academics in Arts, Education and Social Sciences at Strathclyde, currently facing staff reductions and departmental restructuring, might well wonder whether there would be a place for a Scottish Chomsky in the grand new vision.

The number of non-aligned universities in Scotland perhaps suggests that tribalism is less fully developed north of the border – that is why the word Scottish in the title of this article has been placed in brackets. But it does not take very much to provoke comments which suggest public perceptions of a definite pecking order among institutions. For example, the publication in 2010 of statistics on non-completion rates for Scottish universities showed marked disparities, ranging from 2.4% at St Andrews to 21.9% at West of Scotland. The average for all Scottish HE institutions was 8.3% (reported in The Herald, April 6, 2010). The West of Scotland figure prompted Gerald Warner, in a provocative article in Scotland on Sunday to comment: 'It would hardly plunge Scotland into intellectual darkness if that institution were shut down'. (Warner, 2010) His criticisms were not confined to UWS. He argued for a reduction in the proportion of young people admitted to higher education, an emphasis on quality rather than quantity, and political will to address the problem of what he called 'sink universities'. Despite Warner's polemic, no political party is likely to reverse the direction of recent policy, particularly at a time when the job market would be unable to absorb those who might otherwise have gone to university.

However, financial pressures have led to a measure of inter-university cooperation. One strategy has been the pooling of expertise and resources in certain disciplines. An example would be the Scottish Universities Physics Alliance (SUPA), a consortium of eight Scottish universities (Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Heriot-Watt, St Andrews, Strathclyde and West of Scotland). Physics is a very expensive disciplinary field and it makes good economic sense to collaborate in research training, funding bids and industrial partnerships. The aim is 'to place Scotland at the forefront of research in physics through an agreed national strategy, an inter-institutional management structure, and co-ordinated promotion and pursuit of excellence' (www.supa.ac.uk).

But this example of collaboration certainly does not represent the norm at present. Much more common is what might be called 'competitive branding',

evident in the way universities present themselves on their websites and in advertising. UWS has adopted the slogan 'Inspiring People' in its advertisements for jobs and courses, often featuring photographs of attractive male and female students. As Scotland's oldest university, St Andrews plays the historical card: 'Over six centuries it has established a reputation as one of Europe's leading and most distinctive centres for teaching and research'. Abertay describes itself as 'a modern student-focused university' while Heriot-Watt 'is a vibrant, forward looking University'. Edinburgh exploits its high placing on international league tables: under its name on the website it simply says 'One of the world's top 20 universities'. Another university located in the capital, Napier, has rebranded itself as Edinburgh Napier at a cost of some £240,000 (Scotsman, March 29, 2010), investing in the pulling power of Scotland's capital city. This information was obtained following a Freedom of Information request by the paper. The university claimed the money was well spent and had led to an increase in applications, attendance at open days and public visibility.

It is quite difficult to assess the value of the various mission groups and think tanks. Presumably those universities which belong to them think the annual subscription (£10K - £20K) is a worthwhile use of resources. It is doubtful, however, whether this view extends beyond the senior management. Indeed, with the possible exception of the Russell Group, which features quite often in press reports, many academic staff will be unaware of their university's membership or non-membership. At a time of severe financial pressure, and given the variable financial stability of different institutions, there is a possibility that the divisions within the HE sector as a whole will intensify rather than diminish (see Newman, 2010). This would be viewed as regrettable by some commentators. David Watson, for example, formerly Vice-Chancellor of the University of Brighton, has written:

> What lies behind much of the success of the UK sector is the concept of a controlled reputational range. It is important that institutions at each end of the reputational pecking-order can recognise each other, and have something tied up in each other's success. The self-appointed 'gangs' in the system (the Russell Group, the 94 Group, Million+, the 'Alliance' and Guild HE) do not help much in this respect. For them 'autonomy' is mostly bound up in getting a third party (the government) to restrict the freedom of manoeuvre of their rivals. (Watson 2008: 10-11)

'Controlled reputational range' is an interesting choice of phrase and can be read as a defence of diversity in higher education. However, the question remains: at what point does the degree of diversity (in income, reputation, focus, research quality) become so great that the coherence of the system as a whole is called into question.

DISCUSSION

There are several observations that arise from the analysis that has been offered. The first is that there appears to be a substantial gulf between the 'assumptive worlds' (McPherson & Raab 1988) inhabited by university

principals and vice-chancellors and the academic staff whom they are leading. There is now a very considerable literature expressing the concerns of lecturers and professors about the direction in which they are being led (see, for example, Evans 2004; Hussey & Smith 2009), and the main weekly publication reporting on HE developments (Times Higher Education) contains many accounts of the problems, conflicts and frustrations that this gulf creates. The distinguished novelist and art historian Iain Pears, writing in April 2010, referred to 'the gradual accretion of authority by managers over the institutions for which they work. This has now reached the point where it threatens academic freedom, damages Britain's reputation and risks impairing the ability of universities to undertake effective teaching and research' (Pears 2010a: 43). He went on to comment on the erosion of the power of university senates to have effective oversight of academic policy, the disproportionate increase in administrative costs compared to academic costs, and massive rise in salaries awarded to university vice-chancellors, whom he described as indulging themselves 'with all the glories of corporate managerialism'. In a separate letter Pears has drawn attention to 'the degree to which the universities themselves – or rather the manageriat controlling them – have contrived in the subordination of academics to centrally generated goals' (Pears 2010b: 4; see also McKibbin 2010) He proceeds to analyse the membership of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) board and its key committees, drawing attention to the number of 'former academics who have made the transition into university management, and have in doing so vastly increased their salaries and their power'. He describes HEFCE as 'little more than a managerial oligarchy . . . no other country in the world hands out so much money (some £7 billion a year) to such a small group with so little external supervision over what it does. It answers to no one except the secretary of state for business, innovation and skills, and in effect is the means by which the government stranglehold over universities is maintained.' Pears quotes figures which show the shifting balance between spending on academic departments and on administration: between 2000-01 and 2008-09 both increased, but the latter by much more than the former. He is also severely critical of the way in which HEFCE investigates complaints against the management of universities, citing specific cases involving London Metropolitan, Luton and Middlesex universities.

It is interesting to note that this sort of sustained criticism of the direction of higher education appeared much earlier in the United States than in Britain. Books with provocative titles such as The Knowledge Factory (Aronowitz 2000) and The University in Ruins (Readings 1996) appeared more than decade ago (see also Bok 2003). In some ways this is surprising since the ideological climate in America has always been strongly supportive of competition, market forces, and private funding (rather than dependence on the state). But the trends evident in the UK and Europe in recent years have been developing over a much longer period in the States and this means that some of the negative consequences are easier to identify. Thus critics deplore the effects on scholarship and intellectual integrity of

the consumerist and managerial ideology that prevails. Ironically, American observers now feel able to comment adversely on what is happening in UK universities with one recent article entitled 'Britain: The Disgrace of the Universities' (Grafton 2010).

Despite home-grown critiques such as that of Pears, there is little indication that they are leading to adjustment in the behaviour or thinking of university principals. This is not entirely surprising, since the 'reference groups' whose approval they seek – other members of UUK and the various mission groups, politicians, senior civil servants, and potential benefactors – speak the language of money, targets, research excellence, skills, and international profile, rather than the language of students, courses, learning and disinterested pursuit of knowledge (though 'knowledge transfer' between the academic world and business is very much in vogue, usually motivated by the anticipation of mutual economic benefits). They may occasionally pay lip service to liberal conceptions of learning but it is instrumental interpretations that are the key drivers of policy, as the New Horizons report, setting out relations between universities and the Scottish Government, clearly demonstrated (Joint Future Thinking Taskforce on Universities 2008). The pervasiveness of corporate culture is manifest in many ways: in endless restructurings and policy documents (often written, as Pears points out, in a 'bizarre corporate pidgin'); in a form of managed consensus which treats principled dissent as a thought-crime; and, most worryingly, in the replacement of truth by loyalty as the prime institutional value. Regrettably, some academics have been complicit in this process, losing sight of their important role as public intellectuals in a democratic society (Humes 2009).

Secondly, the conceptual integrity of the higher education sector in the UK, taken as whole, must be questioned. Robin Baker, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Chichester, one of the unaffiliated universities, has described the situation in these terms: 'This is not a sector that is cohesive. The existence of the lobby groups (crudely characterised as 'we are the best', 'we are almost as good', 'we are better than you think' and 'it's size that matters and that's us') that co-exist with Universities UK (and Guild HE) simply advertises this' (quoted in Newman 2010:36). Interestingly, he also observes: 'It does not take any politician or senior civil servant long to recognise that there are few more fertile environments to try out divide-and-rule tactics than higher education' (ibid: 36). The old tribal loyalties of subject disciplines may be less evident than they used to be (as the merits of inter-disciplinary work are being promoted by the research councils) but they have been replaced by institutional tribes which, from a government perspective, are conveniently easy to separate and play off against each other.

Thirdly, there are deep issues relating to power and social capital which invite much fuller analysis than can be attempted here. Informal networks between the academic world, the civil service and senior politicians undoubtedly play an important part in policy decisions about the priorities and funding of higher education. Staff mobility between government and higher

education has been increasing. For example, the present Chief Executive of the Scottish Funding Council was previously a senior civil servant in the Scottish Government; a former Vice-Principal at one of the 'ancient' Scottish universities is currently acting as an Adviser to the Donaldson Review of teacher education; the Depute Principal and an Executive Dean of one post-1992 Scottish university both previously worked in government. This movement between the academic and political worlds helps to establish a common culture across institutions that have quite different social functions. As has been shown, the Russell Group is explicit about its capacity to lobby in the arenas that matter. This is not just true of connections that may have been formed at Oxford or Cambridge and have continued into professional life. It also applies to the ancient Scottish universities, two of which the present writer has attended as a student and worked in as a member of the academic staff. Despite many genuine efforts to ensure greater transparency in public life, the private telephone call, the quiet word before or after a meeting still plays a part in the outcome of many important decisions. It is, of course, virtually impossible to research this in any systematic way, though it would be possible to undertake an interesting mapping exercise using data contained in Who's Who and Who's Who in Scotland, tracing connections in the career pathways of people who attended the same university, worked in the same institutions or served on the same public bodies. Despite increased social mobility, patronage still plays a significant part in civil society, perhaps particularly in Scotland where the relatively small population means that many of the key players know each other on a personal basis and meet quite regularly. The persistence of differences in prestige between universities is partly explicable in terms of the deep allegiance which graduates of the older institutions feel to their alma mater and their sense of superiority over the newer institutions. Part of this feeling may be understandable, but part of it is quite primitive and tribal, indicating the continuing potency of attitudes that used to be described in terms of class. It is also territorial, in the sense that it serves to both include and exclude. These attitudes cannot be wished away or dismissed as irrelevant in the soothing rhetoric of politicians or the academic bureaucrats who are now in the ascendancy in higher education. They deserve to be interrogated and subjected to critical analysis, a process that all the stakeholders, whatever their current status, may find uncomfortable.

For this to happen, however, would require a shift in the mindset of academics, from an inward-looking and defensive attitude to one in which they were prepared to assume a public role, engaging with politicians and the press in genuine debate about the purposes of higher education, the relation between intellectual and economic life, and possible future scenarios as Scotland's constitutional position within the UK continues to evolve. Failure to do so leaves the way open for the kind of shallow journalistic commentary offered by McKie and Warner, mentioned earlier. The signs are not particularly promising. Tom Gallagher (2010: 27) has referred to 'the unadventurous character of much of Scottish academia'. Agreeing with

Gallagher, the present writer has said that in Scotland there are 'too many tame academics, house-trained in the politics of compliance' (Humes 2010: 28). But it is by no means a peculiarly Scottish problem. Referring to the UK as a whole, Pirrie *et al.* (2010) note 'the confused set of principles that the higher education sector invokes in reaction to successive policy pressures. The discourse shifts uneasily between excellence and access, between quality and completion rates, and between global reach and community engagement'. They call for 'a far-reaching and honest debate about the role of universities in contemporary society. This would include attention to the conflicting expectations to which they are subject, the incoherence of much of the discourse employed by university leaders, and the need for academics to move beyond constructions of themselves as passive victims'.

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