

RECRUITMENT AND AUTONOMY IN ENGLISH UNIVERSITIES

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter offers the reader some reflections on the state of English universities, and notably their autonomy and the ways in which they recruit.

The authors are a British-born academic, who has spent all his professional life in the UK Higher Education (HE) system (Hayward) and a foreign-born academic, who has spent the last five years in the UK HE, having worked in a continental European university system beforehand (Ongaro), though his higher university degrees are both from England (King's College London and LSE). We hope this mix of backgrounds and viewpoints has helped us in forming a balanced view of the English university system.

Whilst there are many similarities in the way that universities in the United Kingdom (i.e. England Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) are organised, funded and operated, the different histories of these countries, and the changing and asymmetrical nature of devolution

in the UK, suggests that an element of caution would apply in attempting any generalisations and thus the focus here is on England. That said, there are even considerable differences between, for example, the collegiate universities of Oxford and Cambridge, and those English institutions whose history dates back only to the 1960s. However long or short those histories may be, all English universities have come to cherish what the older institutions have long regarded as an essential dimension of their activity, a dimension that underpins the reputation enjoyed by British higher education for the high quality of its education and scholarship: and that is, the autonomy of universities as institutions, and the autonomy of academics within those institutions.

Each English university has been established by Royal Charter or by Act of Parliament, each with degree-awarding powers, each governed by an independent council. Indeed, according to the European University Association (EUA) English universities are ranked second in its autonomy index in relation to staffing issues, such as the hiring, firing, remuneration and promotion of academic staff, and as ‘exceptionally autonomous’ when taking into account the EUA’s three other measures of institutional autonomy - organisational, financial and academic. (EUA, no date) And yet, within English universities and amongst a wider group of interested individuals, there is a sense of mounting concern about changes in the university sector, which are impacting on notions of autonomy as well as, so it is argued, the very nature of the work done in, and by, universities.

The British universities, Oxford and Cambridge included, are under siege from a system of state control that is undermining the one thing upon which their worldwide reputation depends: the calibre of their scholarship. (Head, 2011)

Through an examination of the concept of autonomy in higher education, this chapter seeks to offer a contemporary view of life within English universities with particular regard to the role and status of academic members of staff in those institutions. Drawing on the EUA’s classification of the different elements of university autonomy, this chapter will focus on three main forms of that autonomy, around which there is much debate regarding their changing nature and the impact of those changes on what universities are and on what they do. Firstly, we will examine organisational autonomy and the degree to which universities are self-governing bodies, able to carry out their principal functions of teaching and research in a self-directed manner without direct influence from external agents.

Inevitably, given the sums of money involved, some sourced directly or indirectly from the public purse and an increasing proportion, following the most recent reforms, coming from students as the cost of higher education is shifted further onto those who benefit directly from it [Universities UK, 2013a: 55-63] through subsidised lending, those who provide the funding will exercise some measure of influence on universities, and this will be examined. In contemporary public management terms, what we are investigating are the dimensions of the policy autonomy (the extent to which the organisation chooses its objectives within the policy field where it operates, hence affecting the overall policy objectives, or the tools with which to implement the policy objectives, without external approval or authorisation), and the financial autonomy (the extent to which the organisation is autonomous in the acquisition and deployment of financial resources, without the requirement to be granted external authorisation) of universities as public and partly autonomous organisations (see Verhoest et al., 2004; Verhoest et al., 2012).

It should be said that universities in England are registered as educational charities, which brings benefits such as certain tax reliefs, but which also places limitations on universities by requiring them to act in pursuit of the charitable aims of their governing documents

(https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/350471/research_by_higher_education.pdf Accessed 13.1.16) Most English universities have so-called 'exempt status', meaning their charitable aims and activities are monitored and supervised by a 'principal regulator' (in this case – at the time this chapter is being written - the Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE]) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/exempt-charities-cc23> Accessed 12.1.16) rather than the Charity Commission, which is the body that normally regulates charitable bodies in England (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/charity-commission/about> accessed 12.1.16). Historically there has also been one private, not-for-profit university, which is the University of Buckingham, incorporated by Royal Charter in 1983 and it is also a charity, registered directly with the Charity Commission (<http://www.buckingham.ac.uk/about/> Accessed 12.1.16). Whilst it prides itself on its independence from some of the government bodies (discussed below) to which all the other English universities must account, Buckingham's charitable status and its Royal Charter, which lays down certain governance procedures, including, for example, the operation of an

Academic Advisory Council of senior academics external to the university to advise on academic matters and endorse the appointment of external examiners to the university, do lay certain requirements on the institution. <http://www.buckingham.ac.uk/about/independence> Accessed 12.1.16). Since 2012, a number of other colleges have been granted university status, thus starting to build a small cluster of private universities: a novelty for the historically entirely public English university sector.

Secondly, we will explore universities' autonomy in relation to the recruitment and career development of academics – the core concern of the book in which this chapter is hosted (a profile which in mainstream public management literature is included within the category of the 'personnel management autonomy'). From a legal standpoint, as established by the aforementioned founding Charters and Acts, universities operate independently of government. With regard to the hiring of academics and in the way they provide academics with the means to discharge their duties within a framework that offers opportunities for professional and career development, they must, of course, conform to requirements laid down in employment legislation regarding such issues as equality, discrimination, health and safety, etc. Institutional autonomy is further restricted, to a greater or lesser degree, by the external environment and notably financial management conditions and the pressures stemming from the higher education policy as steered by central government entities such as the HEFCE and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).

Drawing on some of the preceding reflections, this chapter will then seek to scrutinise the working life of academics by investigating the idea of academic autonomy. Long established, though increasingly, so it seems, subject to dispute within and beyond the universities, the ability of academics to determine what they teach and how they teach it, and to develop their research interests and focus as they wish, will be central to this section.

Finally, to try to capture a sense of the intense debate about higher education, we propose some more general reflections on English universities, aimed mainly at an international audience.

1. A (VERY BRIEF) HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Throughout the lengthy history of universities in England, from the establishment of the universities of Oxford and Cambridge in the High Medieval period, to the great expansion of the Victorian era with the ‘redbrick’ universities (a reference to their architectural style) in most major cities, they were never quite subjected to the sort of bureaucratic control that was a feature of other European countries (Anderson, 2004: 193) and from this developed their reputation for autonomy. It was as late as the 19th century that the English capital saw the establishment of a university and in 1849 a significant departure occurred when it became possible to study for a London degree but away from London itself. Colleges around the country that were preparing students for examination for London degrees were soon demanding university status in their own right and thus, in the latter half of the 19th century, ‘redbrick’, or ‘civic’, universities were established in many English provincial cities. (Graham, 2002: 8)

Up until the 1960s, only around 6% of young people in England progressed into higher education (Browne, 2010:18). In 1963 Lord Robbins, at the behest of the Prime Minister, published his report on the future of higher education, calling for a significant expansion of higher education to all those with both the ability and the desire to avail themselves of the opportunity. His report prefigured the Labour government’s establishment of the polytechnics in pursuit of the Robbins’ ambition. The Open University was also established to exploit the new opportunities offered by the advances in radio and television technologies to bring the highest quality of degree-level learning to anyone and everyone, who was unable, or who had not had the opportunity, to attend a campus-based university. (<http://www.open.ac.uk/about/main/strategy/ou-story> Accessed 9.6.15)

The establishment of a degree-awarding body has, however, always required a Royal Charter or an Act of Parliament, such as followed the Labour Government’s 1966 White Paper 'A Plan for Polytechnics and Other Colleges', which heralded the first major expansion of higher education in the post-war era, when some 30 polytechnics as new institutions of higher education were created, conferring degrees awarded by The Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA). But as well as signaling a major expansion in higher education, the creation of polytechnics was also seen as a welcome challenge to the then existing higher education system in the way the Polytechnic ‘philosophy’ confronted the thinking that was arguably predominant in the universities about the separation between, “.. the pure and the

applied, the intellectual and the useful, and the merits of scholarship and the thrust of the ‘mere’ entrepreneur.” (Brosan: 1972, 41)

Polytechnics were, following the Conservative government’s Further and Higher Education Act 1992 (<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1992/13> Accessed 5.1.16) granted the same status as universities and given degree-awarding powers. This was one stage in what Watson (2014: 194) referred to as the ‘extraordinary legislative hyperactivity’ of British governments in policy towards higher education in comparison to other countries, whilst Graham (2002: 11) argued that, throughout the history of higher education in England, the idea of autonomy has never meant an absence of state involvement, even as far back as the foundation of the earliest colleges in Oxford and Cambridge, when monarchs and nobles were keen to become involved as patrons.

Whilst the disappearance of the Polytechnics suggested an end to the binary divide in higher education, some remained sceptical.

“When the polytechnics were restructured as universities under the 1992 Higher Education Act (implemented in 1994), the relabelling did increase the number of working class students in universities. Indeed it tripled the total university population. This did not eliminate inequality, however; it incorporated it into the university system. What had been a distinction between universities and non-universities was increasingly turned into a hierarchy of universities. As inequality of income increased, inequality in higher education tracked it. Incorporation into the unitary national system also reduced the extent to which the new universities responded to local economic and social conditions or aspirations – something that had been a strength of the previous polytechnics. This was part of a general pattern of centralisation of authority in Westminster and a reduced role for municipal government and local coalitions joining business and public authorities. In the unified system, a competitive admissions process reinforced by inequality of previous schooling concentrated students of less privileged backgrounds in the former polytechnics” (Calhoun: 2014, 71-72).

After a doubling of participations rates in higher education following Robbins (Bolton, 2012: 14), the period when Britain was beset by deep economic problems in the 1970s and 1980s saw a tailing off in the number of young people taking up higher education, before increasing again in the late 1980s, boosted at least in part by the impact of the 1988

Education Reform Act (NCIHE, 1997). The most recent, published, official statistics on the proportion of English domiciled young people (17-30 years old) participating in higher education within the United Kingdom for the first time in 2013-14 indicated a participation rate of 47% compared with 42% in 2006-07 (https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/458034/HEI_PR_PUBLICATION_2013-14.pdf Accessed 13.1.16). Simeon Underwood, Academic Registrar and Director of Student Services at London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), offered an illuminating, if personal, picture of the increasing numbers of students in higher education.

‘When I started my professional life at Leeds University in 1977 it had 9,500 students: it now has 31,000. When I moved to York in 1980 it had 3,500 students: it now has 15,000. When I moved to LSE in 2000 it had 7,000 students: it now has 10,500’ (Underwood: 2014, 50).

Funding remained, however, a major obstacle to ambitions for expanding the sector yet further and it was, in fact, at the centre of the major developments in higher education in the 1990s and beyond, with proposed solutions being seen by many as alarming for their intensification of the drive towards the ‘marketisation’ of higher education. (Brown & Carasso, 2013: 1-3) This will be discussed later in the chapter.

2. ORGANISATIONAL AUTONOMY

From the earliest days of universities in England, but especially from the time of the first great expansions in the Victorian era, the picture of university autonomy was perhaps somewhat exaggerated.

From the 1870s, state interest intensified. Royal commissions, often followed by legislation, investigated university education ... state grants to the new civic universities began in 1889; there was a new public concern for industrial competitiveness, ‘national efficiency’.... A modest start was made in the state funding of scientific and medical research. By 1914, therefore, Britain had the elements of a state university system (Anderson, 2004, 194)...

It was the economic crisis of the 1970s that proved something of a watershed in the relationship between educational institutions and the British state and arguably it marked the moment when policy-makers, postulating a connection between the economic ills of society and claimed flaws in education, began to argue more forcefully for a greater degree of intervention in education - and not just by the state. Labour Prime Minister, James Callaghan, speaking on the occasion of the laying of the foundation stone at Ruskin College, Oxford, in October 1976, called for greater state and industry involvement in shaping education policy, citing his concern at what he had been hearing from business leaders around the country:

“... that new recruits from the schools sometimes do not have the basic tools to do the job that is required 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”

On the question of autonomy, Callaghan went on to raise questions about

“... the proper way of monitoring the use of resources in order to maintain a proper national standard of performance ... the role of the inspectorate in relation to national standards ...” (Callaghan, 1976)

According to Robert Phillips (citing Bash and Coulby’s work on education reform), Callaghan’s speech was significant in shaping the discourse about the central link between perceived problematic standards in education and the economic failings of the country (Phillips, 2001, 15).

What Callaghan set in motion with his 1976 speech, the Conservatives pushed further under their administrations from 1979-1997, particularly in the shape of the 1988 Education Reform Act, which imposed central control of pre-university education through the introduction of the National Curriculum, at the same time as fostering ‘competition’ in the sector through the institution of grant-maintained schools and city technology colleges that operated outside the control of local education authorities (Phillips, 2001, 17).

Universities, too, were to be increasingly exposed to ‘market solutions’ and the assumed rejuvenating impact of competition being introduced across the public sector. Throughout the 1980s methods of assessing the performance of all publicly-funded bodies

were developed, in particular through the adoption of performance indicators. In measuring performance, the aim was to be able to assess that performance and thereby hold public bodies to account. Based on the metrics, the push for greater efficiency was launched. (Head, 2011; Scott, 2014) For universities, comparative statistical information would then act as a driver for greater competition between them, resulting in greater efficiency in the use of public money – or so the theory went. Heads of these institutions seemed to agree:

“A range of performance indicators should be developed, covering both inputs and outputs and designed for use both within individual institutions and for making comparisons between institutions” (Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, 1985, as in Johnes, 1996)

A measure of the distance between many in academia and the pro-market policy-makers of the 1980s was encapsulated in the row following Oxford university academics’ decision not to award Mrs Thatcher an honorary degree in 1985. At a speech in Newcastle later that same year, the Prime Minister mocked those who, she claimed, were most critical of the ‘risk takers’ and the ‘wealth creators’:

“.. nowhere is this attitude more marked than in .. the common room. What these critics apparently can’t stomach is that wealth creators have a tendency to acquire wealth in the process of creating it for others.” (As in Kavanagh, 1987; 291)

This was not a narrow, ideological point as successive New Labour governments were equally in tune with the agenda of the country’s ‘wealth creators’ and clearly signaled their belief that higher education had to do more to respond to the needs of industry. In a telling gesture, Gordon Brown’s government abolished the Department for Education & Skills and the Department for Trade & Industry in 2007 and created two new departments: the Department for Children, Schools and Families, and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills. Two years later, the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills simply dropped the ‘universities’ part of its title and became the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, but still with responsibility for universities. (<https://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/universities-department-abolished/406877.article> Accessed 16.6.15) Innovation, skills acquisition, business development – this was increasingly the agenda for the universities.

Beyond any ideological inspiration behind the drive to move higher education closer to business and industry and to open it up further to competition, state budget concerns were also part of the picture. A major shift in the funding of higher education came about in 1998 when, following a report by Sir Ron Dearing, the Labour Government introduced a system of tuition fees in the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998, which, over the following years, became the main source of funding for the universities as the direct teaching grant shrank in importance. (UniversitiesUK: 2013b, 11) Towards the end of the last century, around one-third of 18 year-olds were looking to enter higher education (Bolton: 2012, 14) and, as the sector expanded, and as polytechnics were transformed into universities in the early 1990s, it was the funding of higher education that became the critical issue. The Dearing Committee (NICHE: 1997) recommended that places in higher education be further expanded and that students pay a deferred contribution to the cost of their tuition once in work and earning above a certain level of income. This was a highly significant moment in higher education policy in England, as it signaled the end of fee-free higher education in England and the start of an acrimonious debate amongst the political parties in England and heated disputes within the university community of senior managers, academics and students about the financing of higher education in the country (www.politics.co.uk/reference/tuition-fees Accessed 6.1.16)

<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2007/jul/24/highereducation.tuitionfees> Accessed 6.1.16; <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/dearing-still-shapes-the-agenda-he-set/209757.article> Accessed 6.1.16). Students take out a loan to cover tuition fees, which were initially introduced at the level of £1000 per annum, but following the approval of the Higher Education (Basic Amount) (England) Regulation 2010 (<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukdsi/2010/9780111504161/contents> Accessed 13.1.16), the tuition fee cap for English universities was raised to £9000 and changes to repayment schedules by graduates were also introduced. According to a report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) for the Sutton Trust, average student debt, as a consequence of the new rules, would rise to more than £44,000 (<http://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/payback-time-report.pdf> Accessed 13.1.16). The report suggested that more than 70% of graduates would have some debt written off – an average of £30,000, and whereas under the previous system, some 40% of graduates would have paid off their debts in full by the time they had reached 40, the calculation was that, under the new system, only 5% of graduates would be in this position. Mistaken assumptions about the likely

earnings level of graduates and the decision to write off the debt after 30 years would do nothing to solve the problem of the sustainable financing of higher education. Nick Hillman, who had worked for the Conservative universities minister, David Willets, who introduced the 2010 changes, believed that the government had ‘got the maths wrong’ (<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/mar/21/tuition-fees-former-tory-adviser-government-maths-wrong> Accessed 13.1.16).

Alongside the development of performance indicators to help bring academia more to account, this other feature – which we may label as consumerism, though conscious this may be a contested definition – has been increasingly deployed in higher education. As ‘champions’ of the consumer, governments forge common cause with students to set about the claimed necessary shake-up of academia, which, for too long, has been the unreformed bastion of a self-serving, liberal, intellectual elite that pays little heed to the ‘needs’ of students – at least so one oft-heard argument goes (See, amongst others: Palfreyman & Tapper: 2014, 89-117; Salter & Tapper: 2013, 32; Demaine: 2000, 11).

The ‘Browne Report into higher education funding and student finance’, chaired by John Browne, a former chief executive of BP, made a strong, and contestable, argument, which assumed as its starting point that student choice should be used as the means for driving up quality in higher education. The education sector, however, like healthcare and other knowledge-intensive sectors, displays a strong asymmetry in knowledge between the ‘provider’ and the ‘customer’, leaning towards the former and might, arguably, be better conceived of as a professional-client relationship (teacher-pupil, in old fashioned terms) for which the adequacy of free choice models is questionable (Maringe: 2011, 148-153; Hambleton:1988, 128-130; McMillan & Cheney: 1996, *passim*). Learning processes are complex, and thus one may dispute Browne’s claim that:

“When students are faced with complex choices, it is important that the systems they deal with are as simple as possible” (Browne: 2010: 31).

This statement places great confidence in the idea of the fully-informed ‘rational actor’ using a series of metrics of quality to exercise choice and therefore drive up standards, although Lord Browne does express concern about developing measures of quality, which result in (rationally acting) universities concentrating “..on the measurement process rather

than on their students” (Browne: 2010, 29). Browne then lists a series of measures (recognisable in the questions on the National Student Survey, which is open to all final-year, undergraduate students in England to complete and which, according to the office responsible for collating higher education statistics, is completed by around 80% of eligible undergraduates <https://unistats.direct.gov.uk/find-out-more/about-the-data/> Accessed 6.1.16) to which universities devote considerable resources to ‘managing’ as they use aggregated responses to individual questions as the basis for ‘action plans’ in the hope of improving the metrics next time around. A Google search of ‘universities responses to NSS’ (last run 6.1.16) reveals a long list of universities and university departments indicating how they respond to the results of the NSS with typical promises to use the results to inform how they seek to improve their performance.

The perils of encouraging closer links with business and a more entrepreneurial engagement with other potential sources of funding for higher education through sponsorship and philanthropy has occasionally led to unwelcome media attention. Nottingham University’s decision in 2000 to accept sponsorship from British American Tobacco (BAT) to build a Centre for Corporate Social responsibility, (<http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2000/dec/05/highereducation.education> Accessed 19.6.15) Sir Howard Davies’ resignation as Director of the London School of Economics (LSE) in the midst of speculation about the LSE’s links to Colonel Gaddafi’s Libyan regime (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-12642636> Accessed 19.6.15) and Jane Rendell’s 2013 resignation as Vice-dean for Research at the Bartlett School of Architecture at University College London (UCL) when the school accepted a very large donation from BHP Billiton, the world’s largest mining company, to build a brand-new Institute of Sustainable Research (Warner; 2015), have all been subjected variously to ridicule and arguments that the cases should be seen as cautionary tales about the consequences of a policy direction requiring higher education to fight for funding in the market place. Management practices within the universities have also responded to that great aider of consumer choice – the league table. Several annual league tables of university rankings are published, based on particular factors deemed important by the publishers, weighted in different ways. The main league tables are based on information drawn largely from official statistics provided by bodies like the HEFCE, the Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA) and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), etc. These have increasingly become key ‘drivers’ in so many

aspects of teaching and research in English universities, as university managements place increasing pressure on academics to channel their efforts into achieving ever improving 'scores' in the key indicators used by the most prominent of these league tables, such as The Complete University Guide, The Guardian League Table, The Sunday Times University Guide table (Jones-Devitt & Samiei: 2014, 86-100).

Whilst each table may weight specific factors differently in order to calculate its overall rankings of universities, there is a shared view of several of the key components that go to measuring the 'quality' of a university. These include: the results of the National Student Survey on student satisfaction; the outcome of the Research Assessment Exercise, now 'Research Excellence Framework' (REF), which claims to measure the quality of the research undertaken in the university and may include a measure of the proportion of staff involved in research; employment prospects for graduates; the record of awarding so-called 'Good Honours' degrees (i.e. those degrees classified as upper seconds - final, overall average mark of 60-69% - and firsts - final, overall average mark of 70% or above) as well as possibly the percentage of students who successfully complete their degrees and the views of heads of schools/colleges/sixth forms about universities (<http://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/league-tables/methodology/>; <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/jun/03/methodology-of-the-guardian-university-guide-2015>; http://web.archive.org/web/20110716135415/http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/education/sunday_times_university_guide/article2497779.ece. Accessed 1.6.15).

Arguments about consumers making 'informed choices' based on an array of performance indicators so as to trigger competition, which consequently raises quality, are based on a set of ideological assumptions, the challenge to which frames much of the serious debate within academia and amongst those with an interest in higher education about the nature and future of higher education. (Molesworth et al: 2011, passim)

3. STAFFING AUTONOMY AND RECRUITMENT

On the surface, it would seem difficult to say much of general applicability about the terms and conditions according to which academics in English universities are recruited,

remunerated and promoted because each university sets its own requirements (consistent with employment legislation such as the Employment Rights Act 1996 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1996/18> Accessed 10. 1.16) Recruitment of staff, particularly to full-time, academic posts, is generally done through job adverts in national and international outlets like the Times Higher Educational Supplement (THES), learned and professional societies, and websites like Warwick university's www.jobs.ac.uk/ To comply with national and European employment equality and fairness legislation, in particular the Equality Act 2010 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15> Accessed 10.1.16) universities will have set procedures for short-listing, interviewing and making job offers to candidates. To ensure compliance with the law, guidance on procedures is available through the Government Equalities Office (GEO), which is “..responsible for equality strategy and legislation across government.. (and) action on the government’s commitment to remove barriers to equality and help to build a fairer society, leading on issues relating to women, sexual orientation and transgender equality.” (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/government-equalities-office> Accessed 10.1.16). Commonly in university recruitment procedures, interview panels are guided by pro-formas, which list explicit criteria against which candidates may be ranked. Applicants may be required to present to panels of academics from the relevant subject/department, student panels, research panels and/or a formal interview panel, this latter panel often comprising interviewers, who are external to the department concerned, and a representative from the university’s central office dealing with personnel matters. In view of the increasing sensitivity to league tables, the hiring of academic staff may be on condition that applicants meet some essential criteria including education to doctorate level (which is anyway in most cases desirable but not an essential requirement for being recruited to academic posts, differently from other continental European countries for which it may be an ex lege requirement), a publication record likely to contribute positively to the research assessment exercise (currently denominated Research Excellence Framework).

The teaching credentials of academics in English higher education are coming under increased scrutiny, with further debate about the extent to which academics are sufficiently ‘good’ teachers and universities do enough to promote teaching excellence and to offer sufficient recognition, rewards and career-promotion opportunities to those who excel in teaching rather than research. A perceived dichotomy between research and teaching is,

perhaps, evident in this debate and has been cast into sharper focus by the intense activity that has surrounded the different research assessment exercises. It seems to be a perception that is increasingly picked up by students, too. A recently published survey of students' experience from the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the influential Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), directed by Nick Hillman, one-time special adviser to former Conservative Minister for universities, David Willets, asked university students to list the three most important attributes they wished to see in those who taught them 39% of the students surveyed prioritised the need to have been trained to teach above being an active researcher, which was prioritised by 'only' 17% of respondents. <http://www.hepi.ac.uk/2015/06/04/2015-academic-experience-survey-2/> Accessed 14.1.16) with the resulting, predictable headlines in the higher education press. (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/student-survey-rates-teaching-qualifications-above-research-activity> Accessed 10.1.16) It has to be said, though, that such apparent 'opposition' between teaching and research, is rejected by those, who believe it to be based on a failure to understand that.. 'teaching and research are both about learning' (Rowland et al: 1998, 134). According to Frank Furedi's contribution to the debate initiated by Rowland (1998):

'The separation of teaching from research works to the detriment of both ... teaching becomes separated from the generation of new ideas and necessarily turns into yet another introduction to the subject... The separation of teaching from research also leads to the abstraction of learning from its subject matter.' (Furedi in Rowland et al: 1998, 137)

But, as early as 1997 the Dearing Report (NICHE), had also called for action on the teaching credentials of university lecturers, recommending that, in order to successfully complete their probationary period, all new lecturers should have to gain associate status with the proposed Institute of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, a professional body responsible for recognizing excellence in teaching. (NCIHE [Dearing Report]: 1997, 125-126) The Conservative Government's recent announcement of a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/jo-johnson-commits-teaching-excellence-framework> Accessed 10.1.16), seems set to intensify the focus on teaching in universities and may prompt more universities to incorporate a teaching qualification, or at least membership of the HEA, as a pre-requisite for an academic post.

And there may be some evidence that universities are increasingly looking to emphasise their acknowledgement of the importance of teaching quality.

In the HEA's latest research, published in 2013, into whether the universities are rewarding excellence in teaching through career promotion possibilities, it finds that:

'Most institutions recognize that they need to have policies for promotion based on teaching and learning, however these policies are not yet well embedded and there is a significant lag between policy and implementation. Government focus on raising standards of teaching by introducing some 'market forces' via student choice into the sector may focus institutions on some aspects, however this may also skew attention onto metrics, important for league tables, but may deflect from factors which will have a bigger impact on the real student experience.' (p. 36)
(https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/hea_reward_publication_rebalancingpromotion_0.pdf Accessed 14.1.16)

Role descriptions, eligibility criteria and formal application procedures are commonly used in universities for the purposes of career advancement, particularly for posts of Reader, Professor and for top executive positions. For academic staff below professorial/Head of Department level, terms and conditions will have, to varying degrees, been set in accordance with the national agreements between the university employers, operating under their umbrella University and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA), and the trade union representing academics in higher education: the University and Colleges Union (UCU), an amalgamation of two previously separate unions, the Association of University Teachers (AUT) and the National Association of Teachers in Further & Higher Education (NATFHE), which tended to operate within the boundaries that existed in higher education prior to the 1992 Act. In 2004 UCU members - then as AUT and NATFHE - accepted a significant new agreement - 'The Framework Agreement for the modernisation of pay structures'. This led to higher education salary arrangements undergoing a major change and individual universities have been required to implement new pay and grading arrangements mapped to a national single pay spine, effective from no later than 1 August 2006 (<http://www.ucu.org.uk/hepay> Accessed 2.6.15).

National agreements in relation to academics' contracts below the level of Professor/Head of Department remain in place despite pressures to allow institutions the flexibility to respond to what they may deem to be 'local conditions'. With regard to nationally negotiated terms, conditions and pay scales for academics, universities are still distinguished by their pre and post 92 status when they were either universities or polytechnics/colleges. Pre-92 institutions are governed by their various foundational statutes, charters and ordinances covering all aspects of employment (<https://www.lfhe.ac.uk/download.cfm/docid/A688E1AF-A36F-4885-A223248434AFF578> Accessed 10.1.16), and those statutes can only be varied by application to the Privy Council, that body of senior politicians, current and former members of the House of Commons or the House of Lords, that advises the monarch on these aspects of the sovereign's duties (<http://privycouncil.independent.gov.uk/privy-council/> Accessed 10.1.16).

In 2002 a working group of UCEA/UUK, chaired by Professor Graham Zellick, developed proposals to amend the university model employment statutes concerning redundancy, disciplinary, dismissal and grievance procedures, which proved sufficiently controversial to arouse the opposition of the then lecturers' trade union, the AUT. The measures were, nevertheless, adopted (<http://www.ucu.org.uk/2529> Accessed 18.6.15).

Post-92 institutions saw a national agreement reached in 1990, which provided for an agreed contract of employment and national staff handbook to be in place in each post-92 institution for all full-time and fractional lecturing staff by 31 August 1992. This national agreement, national contract and the national staff handbook remained in place as a new pay framework was implemented in all the universities, pre-92 and post-92 (<http://www.ucu.org.uk/1970> Accessed 18.6.15).

Terms and conditions of academic staff at Chair/Head of Department/Professorial level and above are set individually by institutions and it is a development that has proved controversial within academia, as reported by Britain's leading HE newspaper, the Times Higher Educational Supplement in March 2013:

"Professorial salaries are rising more than twice as fast as pay for other academic grades, raising fears about the inflationary impact of next year's research excellence framework. With just seven months to go until the cut-off point for inclusion of staff in the

REF, figures released by the Higher Education Statistics Agency suggest that professorial staff are gaining higher wage rises than rank-and-file academics squeezed by low national pay offers” (<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/professorial-pay-rises-twice-as-fast-as-rest/2002818.article> Accessed 18.6.15).

This was just one aspect of a growing concern about the fragmentation of the workforce in higher education where academics, despite national agreements, may be employed on different types of contract. There are teaching only contracts or research only contracts, whereby universities employ staff to exclusively do either teaching or research, annual contracts, which may, or may not be renewed at the end of the year, termly contracts, which likewise may or may not be renewed at the end of the term, or zero hours contracts, where the employer is under no obligation to provide the employee with a minimum number of hours of work. This fragmentation raises profound questions relating to fairness, even to morality. There is mounting disquiet about the casualization of academic work (<http://www.ucu.org.uk/3532> Accessed 18.6.15), although definitions and statistics are somewhat opaque. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) latest numbers for 2013-14 report that over half the academic contracts in the UK were fixed term contracts, although The Guardian newspaper reporting on the previous year, suggested that the figure does not include the 82,000 academics on what HESA describes as ‘atypical’ contacts, who may be hired to teach by the hour. (<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2013/feb/04/academic-casual-contracts-higher-education> Accessed 18.6.15) The university academics’ trade union, UCU, reports that over half of the universities, which responded to a 2013 Freedom of Information request, replied that they were using controversial ‘zero hours’ contracts for teaching staff (<http://www.ucu.org.uk/6749> Accessed 18.6.15).

It should be noted, however, that ‘atypical contracts’ may be a relatively new concern to British academia, but they have been widely used in other continental European systems (with a strong oversimplification, especially in the Southern and the central-Eastern European countries) over decades. Casualisation of academic life is also generally deemed to be part of the landscape in the US, where it also is reportedly further on the rise, hence to this regard there seems to be a growing similarity between the UK and the US higher education systems.

4. ACADEMICS’ AUTONOMY

There are contrasting views and opinions as to the role of the academic in higher education and to some degree these reflect different views about what universities are for. John Henry Newman stressed the teaching role of the universities, their role being

“..the diffusion and extension of knowledge rather than the advancement.”
(Newman, 2008: ix)

Here the lecturer was teacher, trying to mould the personality of students through a liberal education, which would turn them into gentlemen of wisdom and good character.

There are, however, important differences between the liberal education university and the Humboldtian (von Humboldt) conception of the university. The latter is intimately linked to the notion of ‘national culture’: the collective (communitarian) horizon that, in a way, superintends and provides sense to the overall enterprise of researching and teaching, tying the national bonds. The former, influenced by the Enlightenment notion of critical reasoning, is more rooted in the idea of universities as places where research and teaching, intimately linked, are developed jointly by teachers and pupils through the exercise of critical reasoning and questioning. Whilst the Humboldtian conception of the university is of HE institutions as having deep roots in the national history; the liberal education university tends to be more universalistic in its thrust (and in a sense more in line with the etymology of university: ‘in all directions’).

The twentieth century saw the emergence of thinking that considered the economic imperatives of university education and research. Anderson (2004: 200) points to the geo-political context of the Great Power rivalries as giving impetus to the call for the wider provision of higher education. As the European Powers vied with one another in their expansionist endeavours, claims of a civilising mission were grounded in reference to the great institutions of learning at home as the expansion of university education came to represent the foundations of a modern civilisation. It was increasingly recognised that such places of learning were also critical to the country’s economic ambitions in an increasingly competitive international trading environment. Anderson (2007: 207) refers to Joseph Chamberlain’s 1902 claim that ‘university competition between states is as potent as competition in building battleships, and it is on that ground that our university conditions become of the highest possible national concern’.

The previously mentioned 1963 Robbins report highlighted the needs of the UK national economy for a highly educated workforce that could respond to the rapidly changing economic and technological environment of the 1960s as an important reason for expanding higher education in the UK and succeeding Labour and Conservative governments have, arguably, each gone further than the other in the economic instrumentalism with which they have pursued higher education policy (Kogan & Hanney, 2000).

“The state has established parameters which are managed by the funding councils. It is within the framework of these parameters, and the managerial strategies of the funding councils, that the universities now exercise their autonomy” (Tapper & Salter, 1995: 59).

Of particular significance amongst these ‘parameters’ was the New Public Management (NPM) inspired initiative of the Thatcher governments of the 1980s, designed to bring about a radical transformation in the public sector, and which has been having a profound impact on higher education. (Kogan & Hanney, 2000: 32) The development heralded the introduction of ‘market mechanisms’, performance measurement of academics against key indicators and output objectives, the emphasis on ‘service quality’ and ‘customer responsiveness’.

One interpretation of the effects of the NPM has been that of a shift of decision-making power away from professional and towards the ‘new managerial professions’ (a leading author is here Ferlie – see Ferlie et al., 1996). In the terms of our framework of analysis centred on the notion of autonomy, the debate since this time has been about the degree to which these parameters/reforms have eroded, and continue to erode, academic autonomy, even if the universities themselves, or rather their governing and management bodies, are ‘enjoying’ some greater autonomy.

Another transformative effect of the NPM has been in the direction of establishing and entrusting more or less independent agencies to run important public functions – at some distance from elected officials and government departments. Especially important in this respect are HEFCE and QAA.

HEFCE describes itself as the ‘lead regulator for higher education in England’. (<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/reg/> Accessed 15.6.15) Its role and legal powers are derived from various Acts of Parliament, and, according to the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act,

HEFCE must provide the Secretary of State with such information or advice relating to the provision of higher education as he or she may require or the Council may think fit, and the Secretary of State may also give HEFCE directions and instructions.

The QAA is the body, independent of government and of higher education providers, that is mandated to monitor and assess standards in English universities. In particular, the QAA conducts what it describes as ‘evidence-based external reviews of higher education providers’ and publishes the outcomes of these reviews. It operates under contract with the HEFCE and refers to its work ‘in this important sector of the UK economy’, checking that universities ‘meet agreed UK expectations.’ (<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us> Accessed 15.6.15).

To some considerable degree, however, it may be argued that the process for assuring the quality of what happens in higher education, both in terms of teaching and research, is in the hands of academics. Teaching is guided by the need to ensure that programmes conform to the various subject benchmarks, compiled by groups of academics in the relevant disciplines, who have been invited by the QAA to agree descriptive statements about what should characterise a student who has graduated in a particular subject discipline. So-called ‘subject benchmark statements’ may be sent out widely for consultation prior to final publication. (<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/subject-benchmark-statements> Accessed 26.5.15) Periodic reviews of each subject area in each university are also part of the process of assuring the quality of what happens within the sector. The fact that these are run largely by the universities themselves, even though they operate according to guidelines agreed with the QAA and include an academic from another university, means that they compete for recognition of worth with other indicators, of the sort that make up the various league tables already discussed. In terms of the day-to-day activity of the academic, there may be a measure of autonomy still exercised as the expertise and authority of the academic is ultimately upheld by institutions, which do not generally allow for complaints against lecturers related to academic judgement of student performance.

In terms of research, the idea of the ‘lone scholar’ spending time in pursuit of knowledge for knowledge’s sake and attending conferences and publishing papers to bring the fruits of such research to a wider audience, is an enduring, if not entirely accurate one, and even in the arts and humanities subject areas, collaboration is seen as an intrinsic aspect

of research. (<http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/documents/project-reports-and-reviews/shearer-west-article/> Accessed 11.1.16) Different trends are at work here: the lone scholar may be challenged by global transformations in what is requested of research work, whereby teamwork and networks of research teams may be a functionally more and more appropriate form for organising research work. (<http://www.independent.co.uk/student/student-life/learning-to-collaborate-no-more-lonely-scholars-394217.html> Accessed 11.1.16) Research in English universities is increasingly driven by competition for funds and prestige, a development dating back to 1986 when the University Grants Committee (UGC), a predecessor of the present Higher Education Funding Councils, dispensed research money. Subsequent ‘research assessment exercises’ were conducted in 1992, 1996, 2001 and 2008 jointly by the various UK Higher Education Funding Councils. With research, the quality of the research output of each university is assessed and ranked by panels of academics and professionals from governmental, non-governmental and private sector bodies and published - in its most recent phase, ending 2014, as the Research Excellence Framework, which informs the selective allocation of research funds to universities. (Foskett: 2011, 33. See also <http://www.ref.ac.uk/>). In sum, raising funds, producing relatively specific outputs (those that will be submitted to the next REF), and more recently doing research that has impact on public policy and society are acquiring a pre-eminent position because of specific institutional and policy pressures active in the higher education system (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/lammy-demands-further-and-faster-progress-towards-economic-impact/408111.article> Accessed 20.5.15).

Not unexpectedly, a number of aspects of this framework have been subjected to criticism from within and beyond the academy. The determination that funded research should demonstrate ‘impact’, in other words, be of demonstrable value to the world beyond universities, such as business, public services, policymaking, etc, was lampooned by British historian Felipe Fernández-Armesto, who argued that the research of pre-eminent thinkers such as Copernicus, Darwin and Einstein would have been rejected because of the inability to demonstrate ‘impact’ (<https://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/comment/columnists/poisonous-impact/409403.article> Accessed 20.5.15). Simon Head, in an article for the New York Review of Books, described performance measures such as ‘impact’ an ‘especially dysfunctional aspect of the British (higher education) system’. Inviting the ‘end-users’ of academic research

such as pharmaceutical companies to be involved in assessing the worth of research was particularly ‘alarming’ given that industry’s record of ‘abusing the integrity of research’ (<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2011/01/13/grim-threat-british-universities/> Accessed 20.5.15).

The reaction of university senior managers to disappointing REF outcomes, leading to a decision to drastically prune ‘under-performing’ research areas of the university (<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/anger-as-surrey-plans-to-slash-jobs-in-politics-department/2019118.article> Accessed 21.5.15) or even close some departments, has been criticized by the academics’ trade union, UCU, as having “... had a disastrous impact on the UK higher education system”. (<http://www.ucu.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=1442> Accessed 20.5.15) This is, however, a trend more than the totality of the picture. In fact, reputed academics can generally cope with pressures while at the same time continuing to pursue their long-term research agenda – which, in our view, is more likely to bear the most important fruits for the advancement of knowledge. (<http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/documents/project-reports-and-reviews/shearer-west-article/> Accessed 11.1.16) However, pressures towards measurable dimension, hyper-competition and consumerism seem to have taken root. What conception of the university is becoming the dominant paradigm in England? We don’t have any firm answer on this, yet we hope to offer the reader some reflections.

5. CONCLUSIONS: UK UNIVERSITIES BETWEEN THE ‘PARADIGM OF EXCELLENCE’, THE ENLIGHTENMENT, AND VON HUMBOLDT

Where are English universities heading to? On the one hand, it seems that consumerism and a certain interpretation of the ‘paradigm of excellence’ is becoming a dominant one. However, the advance of the language of the market and consumers in higher education remains something of a conundrum when one considers that the ‘product’ i.e. the education ‘purchased’ is so dependent on the input of the consumer as well as that of the manufacturer. This would seem to be all the more so the case with the emphasis in the universities on self-directed and independent learning, something which distinguishes universities from schools.

Howard Hotson, Fellow and Tutor in Modern History at St Anne's College, Oxford, and Professor of Early Modern Intellectual History, who is also a member of the executive committee of the Council for the Defence of British Universities (CDBU) is profoundly concerned about the impact of recent reforms to higher education.

“Universities, once regarded as self-governing communities of students and teachers seeking deeper understanding, are now line-managed like private corporations, devoted to maximising performance metrics which do not remotely capture what universities aspire to achieve. These management models impoverish teaching, undermine creativity, trivialise research, and alienate teachers. Worse still, this market system transforms students from active apprentices in the craft of higher learning to passive consumers attempting to leverage their purchasing power into high lifetime earnings. The numerous "mission groups" – the Russell Group, University Alliance, 1994 Group and the rest – do not represent universities as such. They represent senior university administrators, whose primary task is to advance financial interests. Academic unions defend the working conditions of academics, not the values that make their work worthwhile. Learned societies promote individual disciplines, not learning as such. In such conditions, proposals which subvert fundamental academic principles meet no effective opposition” (<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/nov/11/universities-great-risk-we-must-defend-them> Accessed 21.5.15).

Indeed, the very existence of a body ‘for the defence of British universities’, supported, as it is, by so many eminent scholars, thinkers and professionals from the arts, humanities and sciences, is instructive in itself. (<http://cdbu.org.uk/>).

One might ask whether the trend towards consumerism and a paradigm of excellence whereby certain metrics determine what ‘excellence’ in higher education is, does, indeed, represent the whole picture. It is hard to call: we may well assume that the enduring inspiration of the Enlightenment conception of liberal education is still at work throughout most of the UK (not a typo: here we mean the whole of the UK: England as well as Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). It may be more problematic to call whether the Humboldtian conception ever took roots in the UK, and whether it has been challenged more widely by globalisation (linked as it is to the notion of national culture). Yet both remain continued sources of inspiration (Collini, 2012) for scholars and students alike, and for the wider debate

about the role and direction of universities in England as well as throughout the United Kingdom.

The launch of Her Majesty's Government's 'productivity agenda' in July 2015 simply throws into sharp relief the enduring and fundamental disagreements about the purpose of higher education and its future. Even amongst the key policy-makers in Westminster, different emphases and contradictory analyses prevail. While the government's paper promotes the above-mentioned Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) for universities as an important mechanism for helping to align 'graduate skills and expectations with the needs of employers', https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/443898/Productivity_Plan_web.pdf p. 28. Accessed 14.1.16) research commissioned from the National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR) by the parliamentary committees for Education and for Business, Innovation & Skills, points out that:

"As mass higher education has developed in the UK, it has been tempting for many employers to recruit more and more graduates from full-time HE courses (educated largely at state and individual expense) and then to complain about their lack of employability skills..... In short, employer commitment to apprentice training in the UK continues to be limited by comparison with Germany and some other Continental European nations. In large part this reflects the business strategies deployed by many British firms which do not seek to specialise in high skill, high value added product areas or to organise their workplaces in skill-intensive ways..."
(<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmselect/cmbis/565/56510.htm>
Accessed 14.1.16).

And even the universities themselves seem at odds somewhat as to their central 'mission'. In opening statements on the 'about us' section of its website, the University Alliance, a group of mainly 'new' (post-1992) universities and the Open University, refers to the way it excels in 'preparing students for a career in industry ... We understand our role in a changing economy ... we are active in the global marketplace ..' (<http://www.unialliance.ac.uk/about/> Accessed 14.1.16), whereas the Russell Group of 24 pre-1992 universities prefers to emphasize how its '...research-intensive, world-class universities play an important part in the intellectual life of the UK and have huge social,

economic and cultural impacts ..’ (<http://russellgroup.ac.uk/about/> Accessed 14.1.16) A seemingly minor difference, perhaps, but in the words and phrases with which these institutions choose to describe themselves, one does detect traces of the disagreements played out in debates and publications, such as those already mentioned from the CDBU and academics already cited in this work, such as Jones-Devitt (2011), Head (2011), Graham (2002), amongst others, who argue against such things as the ‘marketisation’ of higher education and the march of a neo-liberal agenda through the university system. For the foreseeable future, it seems that disagreements about the fundamental principles and values of higher education in England will continue.

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