Developing and Supporting the Curriculum: National and international policy developments in higher education

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Introduction

In every sphere and at every level, higher education institutions (HEIs) are facing unprecedented competition: for resources, both human and capital; for students, both national and international; as well as for a sense of place as the world realigns from the wealth and power in the twentieth century to the uncertainties of the twenty-first.

There are many factors that have shaped and will shape the higher education (HE) curriculum.¹ Some of these are geopolitical, some economic, some philosophical. This paper can only attempt a snapshot of each, in the hope that it will promote an informed discussion on the way the curriculum might be formed and reformed to suit the needs and aspirations of both Scotland and Scottish HE.

The paper is in three parts:

- Part 1 is an international scan of factors affecting HE around the world
- Part 2 is a national scan of factors affecting HE in the UK
- Part 3 offers areas for discussion.

¹ See Developing and Supporting the Curriculum: Directions, decisions and debate (2012) by Fotheringham, Strickland and Aitchison for definitions of 'curriculum'. This paper tends towards their definition of 'curriculum as vehicle', though other definitions will be evident from time to time.
Part 1: International scan

Demography

In the 100 years from 1950 to 2050 a fundamental shift in the world’s population will have occurred. This change has largely come about by a decline in the birth rates of almost all the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. The result for those countries is a smaller pool of young people from which HEIs can draw. As the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) (2011) expresses it:

There will simply not be enough population growth to drive the kinds of increases in the overall size of our labour force that would be needed to support an increasingly dependent, aging population...To respond to the anticipated economic, social and labour market demands resulting from this demographic shift, universities will need to both expand access to higher education for untapped segments of the population and international students, and increase the quality of education students receive.

The reference to ‘untapped segments of the population’ is important. Over the past few decades it has been the increased participation rates of certain groups that has largely driven the expansion of HE in many countries; especially, but not exclusively, in the developed world. The most common of these groups is women, who in many countries were and still are excluded from post-secondary education because of social, religious or traditional beliefs; but other groups are also under-represented including aboriginal people, disabled people, immigrants, and those living in rural areas. Both developing and developed countries, aware of non-participation as an issue, are taking measures to counteract its effect.

In developing countries, the challenge for the education sector is simply to keep pace with population growth. For instance, Brazil more than doubled its number of students, from 2.4 million to 5.4 million between 1999 and 2008. A similar situation exists in India. In 2009 the National Knowledge Commission, acknowledging the impossibility of creating sufficient university places to meet domestic demand, projected that the number of Indian students studying abroad would continue to grow over the coming decade (Global Knowledge Commission of India, 2009).

In China the situation is slightly different. There, the number of people in the 18 to 24 age range is expected to fall by 22 per cent, or 36 million between 2010 and 2020, but demand will continue to rise as a result of increased participation rates. Furthermore, the latest plan released in June 2010 to reform education places an emphasis on independent thinking, intellectual curiosity, creativity, and innovation. These are all parts of the co-curriculum that HEIs in the developed world, and especially the UK, have always valued (Alumniportal Deutschland, 2010; China Daily News, 2010).

2 In 1950 four of the 10 most populous countries were European; by 2050 no European countries will be in the top 10. Japan, fifth in 1950, will have dropped out by 2050. In contrast, countries such as Nigeria will have moved from outside the top 10 in 1959 to fifth in 2050. The biggest three, China, India and the USA, will stay as they were, though India will have outstripped China by 2050 to take first place (UNDESA, 2010; China Profile, 2010).

3 In Brazil, 60 per cent of graduates are women, a higher percentage than in the USA and UK (Hewlett and Rashid, 2011).

4 In Mexico, 90 per cent of enrolled students are the first in their families to enter HE. In Ghana, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, admission cut-offs for women have been lowered to encourage enrolment, and the Indian Government obliges universities to reserve spaces for certain classes. Brazil has mandated HEIs to reserve space for disabled and Afro-Brazilian students (Altbach, Resiberg & Rumbley, 2009).

5 At present Brazil’s secondary sector remains unable to offer the majority of young people the opportunity to complete their secondary education. As the world’s sixth largest economy it will not be long before that situation is corrected, which implies a large number of students wishing to take places at university. It will be impossible for the country to fill this need and so it is highly likely that more Brazilian students will look abroad to study. At the moment relatively few of them do so - only approximately 20,000. This may be a function of language: Portuguese is not widely spoken and Portugal itself does not possess the kind of HE infrastructure that might attract large numbers.
The conclusion is, therefore, that Scottish HEIs can continue to exploit the market for overseas students for several decades to come, so long as they offer what the students and their sponsoring governments want. What that offer might be is an important curriculum issue.

'Massification'

Since the 1960s, countries in the developed world have seen vast expansions in their HE sectors. In the USA, the policy of 'massification', in the sense of expanding the number of first degree graduates to ever larger and increasingly diversified parts of the population, has been followed for fifty years. In the UK and Europe, the process was later and more gradual, but entrenched by the turn of the century.

Virtually all of this expansion was predicated on the notion that in a post-industrial knowledge-based economy, the better educated the population, the more likely it is to 'succeed'.

Increasingly, the assumption that more equals better has been challenged, usually from a solely economic perspective, amid accusations of 'dumbing down' and degrees of dubious worth (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2009). In its place there has been a growing emphasis on international competitiveness through higher quality in both teaching and research, albeit at lower costs to the state.

Higher education: a public or private good?

In Europe and other developed countries outside North America, a university education was traditionally regarded as a 'public good', that is to say, one that contributed so much to society that it should be 'free' to recipients. It was also regarded as a good investment in simple financial terms. Data show that tax revenues over a graduate's lifetime exceed the cost of a university education, and there are other ways in which the state benefits financially. Graduates are more likely to be flexible in their jobs and more likely to retrain.

They will also lead longer, healthier lives, partly because they are less likely to abuse alcohol and drugs. They are more likely to engage in voluntary work and promote educational, health and social values to the next generation (AUCC, 2011; OECD, 2010). There is also a societal consideration. If education is seen as a 'good thing' per se, then why should cost determine those who do and those who do not receive it, and why should HE be any different from any other part of the educational system?

Increasingly, however, HE is seen as a 'private good'. The argument goes that since the majority of benefits from an undergraduate university education accrue to the individual, it is right that the individual should pay, and wrong that those who do not benefit should pay at all. Furthermore, given the percentage of the population that now goes to university, the state simply cannot afford the entire amount required, especially in a period of slow growth and with an aging population.

On top of all this, universities are always asking for more: the 'top' research-intensive ones because they argue that international pre-eminence can only be maintained by higher spending, especially in certain scientific fields which are hugely expensive, and the others because they are teaching more and more students to a better standard at the same time as improving the quality of their

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6 The USA achieved 40 per cent of the cohort attending post-secondary education in 1960 (Altbach et al, 2009, p 4).
7 In the UK, from 1945 onward.
8 ‘On average across OECD countries, a man with a tertiary level of education will generate an additional $119,000 in income taxes and social contributions over his working life compared to someone with just an upper secondary level of education. Even after subtracting the public revenue that has financed the degree, an average of USD 86,000 remain, almost three times the amount of public investment per student in tertiary education.’ (OECD, 2010, p 13).
research. There isn’t a bottomless pit, however, so if universities really do need more money they will have to find it from somewhere, which almost certainly means a combination of student fees, various non-governmental external sources and increased efficiency.9

At a personal level, discussion about the financial benefits of a university education provide a further complication. Firstly, while it may be true in aggregate that graduates earn more, the individual has no guarantee that it will be true for him or her. Secondly, the years spent in HE mean a period not earning significantly and it will be some time before even that loss is consolidated. Thirdly, much of the data on student earnings is based on the past when fewer people went to university and so were more likely to become high earners. Fourthly, some of the benefits of working alongside graduates accrue to those who did not receive higher education, so why take the risk? Finally, because graduates tend to live healthier lives and are less likely to be unemployed, they can expect to draw lower levels of transfers from the state than non-graduates; in other words they will pay high taxes with a lower expectation of receiving even the same amount back. Taken together these factors make the decision to enter HE increasingly difficult. A change in the overall equation, say the introduction of fees, may tip the balance against it, or, as has been shown recently in the USA, may increase non-completion rates (Associated Press, 2011).

Either way, once the system introduces fees there is an impact on the curriculum, for now the student becomes more of a consumer with all that that implies in terms of rights and entitlements.

The cost of quality

Universities around the developed world are cutting costs, as can be seen in larger class sizes; poorer building maintenance and reduced or zero construction; outdated library holdings; poorer employment contracts for staff and so on (Associated Press, 2011, p 11). Despite their best efforts, however, the reality is that making economies in universities is difficult: the sector is labour intensive and not easily given over to a systems approach, and staff are understandably resistant to any deterioration in their working terms and conditions. Furthermore, such cost cutting may in the end prove counterproductive as non-completion rates rise and applications for places fall (Associated Press, 2011).

If one side of the equation is reducing costs, the other is increasing revenue. Therein lies a dilemma; for hard won reputations for quality, although not easily or quickly lost at university level, do deteriorate over time. It is possible to envisage a situation where economies result in fewer fee-paying students and research contracts, less corporate sponsorship, lower quality staff being recruited and so on, requiring costs to be cut further in a damaging and potentially disastrous downward spiral.10

Overseas recruitment

One response in many OECD countries to the danger of a cost-revenue-cost spiral has been to recruit increasing numbers of fee-paying students from around the world. It has become very big business.11 In 2007 it was estimated that there were 2.8 million internationally mobile students worldwide, up from 1.8 million in 1990 (Green and Koch, 2010).

9 'It is worrying that the significant increase in spending per student over the past decade has, in many countries, not been matched with improvements in the quality of learning outcomes.' (OECD, 2010, p 13).

10 As Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley write: 'While competition has always been a force in academe and can help produce excellence, it can also contribute to a decline in a sense of academic community, mission and traditional values.” (2009, p 1-2)

11 For instance, education services was the third largest export revenue category in Australia in 2007-08 (Green and Koch, 2010).
By attracting over 350,000 international students, the UK was second only to the USA as a destination, and in Scotland, international sources made up around 11 per cent of all of the HE sector’s income in 2008-09 and had a wider economic impact of £2.44 billion on the Scottish economy (Scottish Government, 2010).

There can be no doubt that language is a factor in attracting overseas students. Seven of the top 10 countries sending students to France, which lies third in this particular league table, are francophone countries. Given the dominance of English as the language of commerce, science and communication, it is unsurprising that many talented (and/or wealthy) students from the developing world seek a degree in a country that offers them the chance to acquire fluency in the language as well. Equally unsurprising is the reaction of European HEIs in particular, many of whom now offer English as the language of instruction. In 2007 a survey of all recognised HEIs in European countries in which English is not the first language reported a tripling of English-taught programmes in the previous five years. The leaders are the Netherlands, Finland and other Nordic countries. Fees are not universal, though this trend is spreading (Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley, 2009).

Counter-intuitively perhaps, the introduction of fees, or rapidly rising fees, has not reduced the number or quality of students studying in Europe and the USA. It would seem that reputation and employability are more important factors than price in attracting talent from overseas; something that must be borne in mind when cost-cutting is considered. For the receiving countries there is also the additional bonus of retaining students with postgraduate qualifications, thereby adding to the sector’s reputation and making it more attractive for another generation from the donor countries (Green and Koch, 2010).

Internationalisation

Technology has changed the face of HE. Distance learning enables students from around the world to follow the same curriculum, while the web provides instant communication as well as a source of data. Academic books and journals appear online and researchers collaborate and communicate instantly via email and Skype. Some argue that all this represents no sea change; merely a speeding up of something that universities have always been about and always engaged in. True or not, it has undeniably wrought significant changes in the international aspects of HE.

Many developing countries such as Qatar, Singapore, South Africa and the United Arab Emirates have actively promoted an international perspective by recruiting academics from around the world to their universities and enabling prestigious foreign institutions to establish local campuses as a means of creating ‘regional hubs’ for HE. To the overseas university the main advantage of such a hub is greater access to an expanding market; for the hosting country it is that their

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12 In 2008-09 the USA had 672,000 overseas students, mainly from India, South Korea and Japan, in that order. The UK was second (351,470); France third (246,612); Germany fourth (206,875); and Australia fifth (211,526) (Green and Koch, 2010).

13 Some European English language programmes are not without troubles of their own, however. The Alumniportal Deutschland reported on 16 February 2011: ‘As universities across Europe offer more programmes in English to attract an international student body and raise their international profiles, the growing pains are becoming evident. Some students complain that their professors’ language skills are not classroom-ready. Some professors complain that their students, many of whom come from different countries and cultures, aren’t adapting well to their new environment.’

14 In 2007 Danish institutions were the most expensive at around 11,000 Euros per year (Wächter, Bernd, Maiworm and Friedhelm, 2008).

15 In 2012 it was reported that the number of overseas branch campuses has reached 200 worldwide, with 37 more planned, 13 of which are USA universities. UK universities were also front runners with 25, nearly doubling their number in the past two years (Morgan, 2012).
brightest students can benefit from a degree from an HEI in the developed world, but with a much higher likelihood that the students will stay in their home country rather than being tempted to emigrate.\textsuperscript{16}

A further aspect of internationalisation is a growing trend towards 'Higher Education Areas', where harmonisation of policies and practices are designed to facilitate the movement of people and ideas. The template for such a model is the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy in Europe (European Commission, 2007), but this has been followed by the creation of Enlaces in Latin America, the Brisbane initiative involving 27 Asian-Pacific countries and a harmonisation strategy in the African Union (Altbach, 2009).

The challenge for individual HEIs is to reap the benefits of harmonisation without also losing their unique identity. For many, such uniqueness was derived from a historical record of serving their local communities, but it is unlikely that any HEI curriculum focused in such a way will succeed today. The Republic of Ireland, for instance, promotes a strategic approach to the curriculum:

\begin{itemize}
  \item The system should be strengthened by the development of regional clusters of collaborating institutions (universities, institutes of technology and other providers), and by institutional consolidation that will result in a smaller number of larger institutions... operating as collaborative partners to deliver on jointly agreed strategic objectives.
\end{itemize}

(Hunt Report, 2011, p 3)

In 2012, every Irish HEI has to define its 'strategic future'. The Higher Education Authority in Ireland will then look at all the proposals and create a blueprint, designed to feed into year on year improvements, with the intention of creating a more coordinated system within three to five years. Individual institutions will form agreements with the Authority stating how they will contribute to national objectives and the metrics they wish to be measured against. Their performance against these agreed targets will then determine at least some of their funding (Reisz, 2012).

A similar, regional approach is being proposed for Scotland. In the Government's pre-legislative paper \textit{Putting Learners at the Centre} (Scottish Government, 2011b), a strong case is made for a strategic realignment between the college and university sectors. This will require a rationalisation of provision, especially in colleges (paragraph 133).

Some HEIs around the world might baulk at the notion of the state setting 'strategic objectives', especially 'for profit' institutions in the private sector. They, above all, are well versed in meeting the needs of the market; fail in that and they fail altogether.

\textbf{'For profit' HEIs and privatisation}

One of the most startling changes that has occurred in HE across the world in recent times has been the growth of 'for profit' private institutions.\textsuperscript{17} It is estimated that today some 30\% of global HE enrolment is in for profit HEIs (Altbach, 2009) and it is the fastest growing sector

\textsuperscript{16} It should not be assumed that the branch network is a cheap option, either for students or universities. Lawton and Katsomitros (2012) report that data collected from 154 branch campuses produced an undergraduate mean fee for 2010-11 of $13,800 (£8,918) and a median of $9,700. The University of Central Lancashire plans to invest £7.5 million on a branch campus in Thailand in 2014.

\textsuperscript{17} The distinction between 'private' and 'public' HEIs is somewhat fraught. In the UK, for instance, universities are 'private' in a legal and accounting sense, and yet are subject to regulations and laws that effectively place them in the public sector. Their position is further complicated by issues of funding. In Peter Knight’s words: ‘As the universities dangle uncomfortably in the void between the public and private sectors, they get the disadvantages of both and the advantages of neither.’ (Knight, 2006). The 2011 White Paper for HE in England appears to assume that existing universities are in the public sector and that the sector should be ‘opened up’ and made more competitive by the introduction of other private sector providers.

(See http://bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/higher-education/docs/h/11-944-higher-education-students-at-heart-of-system.pdf).
worldwide. It is especially evident in the Far East, with countries such as Japan and South Korea educating around 70 per cent of their students privately, but it is expanding in other parts of the world as well. In Brazil, for instance, 77 per cent of the country's 6 million students are educated in private HEIs, and courses in such institutions are not confined to undergraduate level. Brazil has a number of consolidated research centres, some public and some private, which granted 12,000 PhDs and 41,000 master's degrees in 2010; a 300 per cent growth in 10 years (Knobel, 2011). In some areas, USA HEIs have provided the impetus for private sector expansion. This is especially true in the Middle East and North Africa.

Generally, for profit private sector HEIs offer places to students who otherwise would not earn them in state funded universities. They are therefore less prestigious than their publicly funded equivalents; their staff are often less qualified; and they regard students as 'consumers' in what is usually a profit maximising business model. In China, the largest provider in the world with around 20 million undergraduates, the private sector plays an important role in satisfying demand. However, as in other countries where such expansion has occurred, the private sector in China tends to be socially divisive. This is because better-off students are able to pay the higher fees of those institutions affiliated to prestigious state universities, while poorer ones have to settle for second rate establishments (Ertl and Yu, 2010).

In the countries of the former Soviet Union the private sector is growing significantly, again in response to demand pressures; while in other European states traditionally wedded to the notion of a university education as a 'public good' to which no fees are attached, students' fees have either been introduced (England, Denmark, Austria, Netherlands, Slovakia, Malta and Ireland) or are being seriously considered (Sweden and Finland) (Green and Koch, 2010).

In many developed countries, especially in Europe, but also in other parts of the world, private HEIs remain the exception. Nevertheless, some would argue that HE is being increasingly privatised, a result not just of massification, but also of political inclination (Altbach, 2009). The manifestation of such a change is most obviously shown in student fees, but the increasing imperative to gain research contracts, attract consultancy fees and forge ever closer links with industry are also indicators of a decreasing reliance on state funding.

Some of this shift in financing has resulted in awkward questions for universities and university staff, perhaps most recently brought into focus by the London School of Economics' connection to the Gaddafi regime (Hughes, 2011). The need to commercialise research outputs, and to produce licenses and patents and thereby income streams, flies in the face of the traditional role of the university: namely to produce knowledge and make it available freely for all. As the so-called 'triple helix' of university-government-industry linkage grows ever stronger, so also is the danger of a bunker mentality developing, both in HEIs and the countries in which they operate. Yet herein lies another contradiction, for this is the age of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) which enables data to be spread worldwide at the touch of a button; where free-source material is uploaded daily; and where political systems and regimes fall because comments and pictures on Facebook and Twitter cannot be controlled.

The co-curriculum

The Employability Enhancement Theme placed a strong emphasis on the need for HEIs to provide students with more than just the straightforward subject content knowledge and skills that they have traditionally taught. Many HE teachers would argue that universities have always done this, perhaps implicitly or perhaps by osmosis. The reality is, however, that if wider skills and attributes are not explicit within the curriculum, not everyone will acquire them. It is also a twenty-first century reality that such skills are in ever greater demand, while those of specific subjects are likely
to erode at an increasing rate as technology advances. Careers themselves have become more volatile and employers are seeking 'change makers' as much as those who can adapt to change.

It may be, as the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) argues, that we have a twentieth century curriculum designed for twentieth century needs: disciplines, subjects, courses, credit hours. What we require is a radical rethink; not just to improve employability, vital though that is, but also to enable students to evaluate information critically and convert it into knowledge and action; to solve problems by collaborating with people from very different backgrounds and cultures, and to combine entrepreneurial creativity and technological know-how with humanistic values and vision (LEAP 2007, p 21). In other words, a twenty-first century curriculum for twenty-first century needs.
Part 2: National scan

Scotland

The total population of Scotland has been relatively stable over the last 50 years. It reached a peak of 5.24 million in 1974 before falling to 5.05 million in 2002 and then rising again in the last eight years (General Register Office for Scotland, 2011). Like most OECD countries, Scotland has a declining birth rate and an ageing population. Population growth alone will therefore not provide Scottish HE with additional numbers for the foreseeable future.

Both the number of students (287,565) and the number of entrants (147,465) to HE in Scotland reached record levels in 2009-10. Since 2007-08 the number of Scottish students in HE has increased by 3.1 per cent, while students from the rest of the UK and outwith have increased by 6.6 per cent and 19.8 per cent respectively (including an increase of 26.9 per cent in EU students in the last two years) (Scottish Government, 2011a). There is a strong suggestion, therefore, that the 'no fees' policy is highly attractive to EU students.

In 2009-10 entrants from deprived areas remained under-represented although they are now at the highest level recorded, due both to a slight depopulation and increased participation rates from these areas (Scottish Government, 2011a).

HEIs account for 82.7 per cent of all students enrolled in Scottish HE in 2009-10, with the remaining 17.3 per cent studying HE courses in colleges. Nearly all those in colleges (98.5 per cent) were studying at the sub-degree level, while a majority of those at HEIs (61.2 per cent) were studying at the first degree level (Scottish Government, 2011a).

In 2009-10, 55.8 per cent of those in HE were female (Scottish Government, 2011a). This percentage has barely changed in the past 10 years. The number of distance learning students has increased by 1,645 (5.2 per cent) since 2008-09, up from 31,850 to 33,495. This was due to the rise of 1,685 (7.9 per cent) in the number of first degree and postgraduate distance learning students from 19,650 in 2008-09 to 21,335 in 2009-10. At first degree level, 60.5 per cent of distance learners were female and 39.5 per cent were male. However, at postgraduate level, male distance learners accounted for the majority, with 53.9 per cent of the enrolments compared to females at 46.1 per cent.

While the number of people enrolled in HE increased by 2.8 per cent overall, this was driven by students aged 16 to 29, whose proportion rose by 4.8 per cent (from 195,180 in 2008-09 to 204,630 in 2009-10). In contrast, the enrolments among those aged 30 to 60 decreased by 2.2 per cent (from 79,380 in 2008-09 to 77,635 in 2009-10) (Scottish Government, 2011a).

The majority of students in Scottish HE are women and so expansion by means of increased participation must come from other groups, such as disabled people, and those in deprived and rural areas. Expansion of this sort, alongside issues such as students who work as well as study, the drive for greater flexibility in entry and exit points and other societal movements, carry implications for the curriculum in terms of teaching and learning. The sector has been very successful in recruiting students from overseas and must continue to be, especially given the constraints resulting from recent financial crises and economic recession.

It is against this demographic and financial backdrop that the Scottish government produced its discussion paper Building a Smarter Future: Towards a Sustainable Scottish Solution for the Future of Higher Education, in 2010. This was followed a year later by a pre-legislative paper: Putting Learners at the Centre - Delivering our Ambitions for Post-16 Education. It anticipates a White Paper in the second half of 2012.
The paper and its predecessor are explicit in rejecting the fee model adopted in England, arguing that it is 'socially divisive' (Scottish Government, 2010, 2011(b)). Instead they offer 'a unique Scottish solution': '...the retention of public funding at the maximum sustainable level whilst also seeking new sources of revenue and enhancing existing ones and of course striving to get best value for every public pound and penny spent in and by the sector' (Scottish Government, 2011 (b), Ministerial Foreword). The recurrent themes in the paper are: 'growing the economy, maximising the return on our investment, improving outcomes and service integration' (paragraph 5). A reformed post-16 sector, the paper says, must be: sustainable; open to all; flexible; learner-centred; focused on jobs and growth; diverse; excellent; international; and well led (paragraph 21).

*Putting Learners at the Centre* argues that a strategic approach to post-16 education cannot be confined to universities alone. It '...must not only look at colleges, skills and training as well, but also at how all of these sectors interact - and crucially - how learners move between them' (paragraph 21).

The link between secondary and tertiary education is highlighted in the paper by the radical approach to secondary education of Curriculum for Excellence, which will require the tertiary sector to be 'appropriately' aligned (paragraph 2). Given the new skills and attributes that young people will possess on entering HEIs, it is critical to evaluate the post-16 curriculum, and especially the co-curriculum in this context. This work has already started, coordinated by Universities Scotland.\(^{18}\)

The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework is praised, and institutions are encouraged to make greater use of it, while at the same time recognising that institutions have a responsibility to ensure '...curriculum fit and a coherent educational experience' (paragraph 27). There is also a demand for greater acceptance of prior learning for those entering universities, especially students with Higher National qualifications.

The paper describes the establishment of Student Partnership Agreements for every college and university. This agreement will sit alongside a new set of indicators designed to cover quality, student satisfaction and student employment information across the UK (paragraph 188). A significant section of the paper is allocated to widening access. The Scottish Funding Council will be developing Widening Access Outcome Agreements which, if broken, will incur financial penalties.

Graduate employability is emphasised, and a need for institutions to liaise with employers generally. In addition to the technical and core skills necessary for a particular job, the paper emphasises the need for HEIs to develop critical thinking and wider attributes such as enterprise, initiative, adaptability, and entrepreneurship (paragraph 76).

The paper praises the university sector for its research record (paragraph 12). However, there is a clear statement that research funds will be concentrated in a '...smaller number of universities with a track record of world-leading research' (paragraph 101), leading to speculation about the possibility of 'teaching only' universities. Concern is also expressed about duplication between providers, especially in the college sector, where the case is made for a more coherent provision and reduced duplication (paragraphs 133 to 139). Furthermore, it suggests there is room for consolidation and further structural change in the university sector (paragraph 144), citing the example of nurse education, 'where there is duplication of effort' (paragraph 143). Recent events in Dundee indicate that such consolidation might prove difficult, however (Matthews, 2011).

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\(^{18}\) The report is quite explicit: 'Local authorities, colleges and universities must therefore work together - locally and regionally - to integrate the planning of the curriculum; and, more specifically, to widen the number of students with the qualifications necessary to progress into university with advanced standing. Success in articulation will rely not just on institutions being flexible and adapting their provision to maximise the chances of success, but also in their working together more carefully to manage learners' transitions between different sectors and styles of learning' (paragraph 24).
The Paper offers a strategic vision of the curriculum, offering learners a coherent educational journey from school through to employment. It may provide an opportunity to ensure that the wider, 21st century skills and attributes of the co-curriculum become as embedded as the more prosaic but necessary content skills that HEIs have traditionally provided. It also suggests that universities examine their place in the educational landscape to find particular niches. In short, it is a paper that actively prompts and promotes change in the sector; albeit ones that not everyone will welcome.

England

In June 2011, the White Paper Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System was presented to Parliament.19 Despite its title, the Paper's main thrust was the way HE is to be adequately funded without adding to public spending. It was to be seen as 'part of the wider government agenda to put more power in the hands of the consumer' (BIS, 2011) and was unequivocally focused on higher education teaching (p 8) rather than research, as well as the student experience generally. It emphasised a more diverse sector offering more avenues for study to a wider section of the community (p 5).

It said that the Government would make it easier for new organisations to enter the HE market and would 'review the use of the title "university" so there are no artificial barriers against smaller institutions.' It would '...decouple degree awarding powers from teaching in order to facilitate externally assessed degrees by trusted awarding bodies' (pp 5 to 6).

The White Paper made much of 'empowering' students by, among other things, requiring universities to publish student charters, online reports of student surveys, and graduate outcomes. The Office of the Independent Adjudicator would provide a 'formal independent mechanism for unresolved complaints' (p 6). The Higher Education Funding Council would be '...taking on a major new role as a consumer champion' (p 2). Taken together, these points could be seen as a quid pro quo for students who, from 2012, will be facing fees of up to £9,000 per year,20 though they will not be required to repay their debt until they are earning more than £21,000 per year (Elmes, 2012).

By focusing on the student (as consumer) and introducing 'the market' in a wider sense to the English HE sector, the White Paper was extremely radical and provoked considerable protests from a number of quarters, including the Liberal Democrats in the Coalition. It has been reported in the media that as a result, the more contentious elements have been shelved and are not planned to be presented to Parliament before 2015 (Gill, 2012).21 Nevertheless, changes already made or planned have undoubtedly set English HEIs on a path quite divergent from those north of the border. The implications of such divergence to the Scottish sector have yet to make themselves manifest.

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19 It was a response to the Browne Report (2010), which had been set up by the previous government, though it was said by some not to reflect Browne either accurately or completely (Eastwood, 2011).

20 English universities are only allowed to charge the maximum £9,000 in 'exceptional' circumstances. It seems, however, that all save one of the Russell Group are planning on making such a charge and that every English HEI is planning on charging significantly more than the £7,500 average the Government anticipated (Guardian Datablog, 2011).

21 It was reported that the Government had stepped back from introducing 'American-backed private universities' to increase competition allowing 'under performing universities...to go bankrupt and be replaced by more successful institutions' (Winnett and Paton, 2012).
Part 3: Areas for discussion

- This paper suggests that there are eight international factors that will increasingly influence the curriculum in Scottish HEIs. On a scale of one to 10, estimate their relative importance to your institution. Once you have decided which ones are critical, discuss how the curriculum should be shaped in response.

- Massification has changed certain aspects of the curriculum, but has that change been thoroughly explored and considered? How can accusations of ‘dumbing down’ be countered?

- What kind of curriculum model for Scottish HEIs will continue to attract large numbers of overseas students in the face of increasing competition, especially if the funding regime in England provides universities there with a financial advantage?

- The Hunt Report takes a strategic approach to HE in Ireland. The government there will ask universities to suggest targets for ‘clusters’ of providers, organised regionally. A similar approach is being proposed in Putting Learners at the Centre (paragraph 144). What opportunities for curriculum reform might be afforded through regional consolidation?

- How can the HE curriculum be aligned with Curriculum for Excellence in the secondary sector?

- Is distance learning or developing overseas campuses profitable avenues to pursue, with all that they imply for costs as well as revenues?

- How might the curriculum be shaped in order to help meet the government’s targets for wider access?

- Another way of looking at the issues raised in the paper is to divide them into four dimensions: the economic, the financial (at a personal level), the academic, and the political. How might the curriculum shape, or be shaped, by each of these?
References


Knight, P (2006) So are universities public or private? The Guardian, 20 June, available at: www.guardian.co.uk/education/2006/jun/20/highereducation.comment (last accessed 20 February 2012)


