British Higher Education: "Exceptionalism" in face of the Bologna Process?

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The purpose of the paper is to examine the extent to which the United Kingdom higher education system diverges from that in other countries in the European Higher Education Area. It concludes that the fees and the sometimes ruthless stratagems to reduce costs are what really set the UK apart from other European countries. It is true that other countries have also imposed draconian cuts on their universities, but the British state is now refusing to finance non-STEM subjects at all, and English higher education has become the most expensive in Europe. In this respect, the country has gone its own way regardless of any disapproval that may be forthcoming from across the Channel or from the OECD. Three main reasons are suggested why this is so: the early, profound and bipartisan impact of Thatcherism, policy emulation of the United States, and Europhobia.

1   Exceptionalism and Convergence

It is often assumed that the United Kingdom knows little and cares less about the Bologna process in higher education (cf. *Trowler 2003)*. The impression has somehow arisen that whereas the 47 countries of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) are working towards harmonisation, the UK remains aloof from the process, and follows its own political and economic objectives with scant regard for European policy.[1] The purpose of the present paper will be to examine whether this is true. To what extent, if at all, does the British higher education (HE) system set itself apart from that in other European countries? Does it really manifest exceptionalism by going its own way? If so, in what respects? And why?

The Random House Dictionary (2011) defines the term "exceptionalism" as "a theory that a nation, region, or political system is exceptional and does not conform to the norm". There is a dominant perception that the country or society is unusual in some way and does not need, or even refuses, to conform to the normal rules or general principles observed by others. Many countries postulate a claim to exceptionalism, and this sometimes results in the exaggeration of difference in order to prove distinctiveness.

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[1] There are also eight consultative EHEA members, namely the Council of Europe, European Students Union, European University Association, European Association of Institutions in Higher Education, European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, UNESCO, Education International and BUSINESSEUROPE.

In analysing exceptionalism, however, it is important not to ignore the extent to which countries are *similar* as well as the degree to which they are different. Indeed, it is easy to exaggerate exceptionalism by failing to realise that many countries have their own claims to "difference". Clearly, attempts to justify exceptionalism can be based upon a variety of arguments which are sometimes mutually reinforcing. These may be historical (e.g. the United Kingdom's links with the United States of America), ideological (e.g. a society's attitudes towards state power), mythological (e.g. manipulation of history in order to buttress nationalism), or expedient (e.g. economic instrumentalism).

The way in which the European Union (EU) was set up and is currently governed leaves room for diversity, if not exceptionalism. The founders were acutely aware that the nation states wanted to protect their sovereign power over higher education, and proceeded delicately in view of the suspicion, especially on the part of the Danes, the British and the French, that the Commission was using treaty procedure in domains (like higher education) which did not strictly come under the treaty's remit and to which it (arguably) did not properly apply *(Corbett 2005, p. 116)*. It used practical enterprises such as joint study programmes, university networking and study visits to build support for the European project, and help overcome indifference towards it *(ibid., p. 117)*. The Open Method of Coordination was adopted in which the Council of Ministers agrees on very broad goals, and the Member States transpose them into regional and national policies with benchmarks to indicate best practice.[2] It does not lead to binding European Union legislation nor require the member states to change their law; rather it aims to spread good practice by consensus. Attempts at federalism often cause resentment and resistance, hence the European Commission (EC) in an explanation of the Bologna Process defends itself against accusations of attempts to unify.[3] It clearly acknowledges that the aim is to create convergence but not "standardisation" or "uniformisation" of European higher education. *Marginson (2009)* defines convergence as a process of coming into *proximity* without blending into one system, whereas integration is the formation of a single system. The EC has, however, become bolder since its early days and, though it acknowledges the necessary independence and autonomy of universities, it emphasizes that the Process is not just a political statement, but a binding commitment to an action programme.

The structure of the present paper will be as follows. In initial sections, it will attempt to evaluate the extent to which British higher education (HE) complies with or deviates from Bologna action lines. It will establish whether policy innovations are attributable

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[2] Open Method of Coordination. http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/areas/industrialrelations/dictionary/definitions/openmethodofcoordination.htm/ Accessed 3.2.2012.

[3] The Bologna Declaration on the European Space for Higher Education: An Explanation. http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/bologna/bologna.pdf/ Accessed 10.2.2012

in any way to the Bologna Process, or whether they pre-dated it in a country-specific aetiology. Change that demonstrably does *not* take place in response to the Process implies an independence of development which nourishes the "exceptionalism" proposition. The essay will conclude by discussing the reasons for any "exceptional" findings. A suitable framework for discussion is suggested by the report entitled "Focus on Higher Education in Europe 2010: The Impact of the Bologna Process" *(EACEA 2010)* which was prepared for the European Ministerial Conference when the EHEA was launched in March 2010. It was a fully collaborative exercise between the Eurydice Network and the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG), and is based upon six core aspects of the Process. These are 1) the Bologna structures and "tools", 2) student mobility, 3) quality assurance, 4) the social dimension of HE, 5), lifelong learning and 6) the economic crisis and higher education. In the interests of manageability, the paper has excluded research from its scope, and dealt with the various aspects in general terms.

2   The Bologna structures and tools

The Bologna "tools" consist of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), the Diploma Supplement (DS) and the National Qualification Framework (NQF).

2.1   Credit transfer and the three cycles

Credit transfer was a founding concept of the Bologna Process: the Berlin Communiqué (2003)[4] called for the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) to be used as a transfer and accumulation system across Europe in order to promote easily readable and comparable degrees that would facilitate mobility across the area; and the Bergen ministerial meeting (2005)[5] adopted a report on the overarching "Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area" which includes typical credit ECTS allocations for the first and second cycles (Bachelor's and Master's degrees). Though these provisions are not legally binding, many countries within the EHEA find themselves obliged to modularise and disaggregate their degree courses into BA/MA (followed by the PhD) in contradistinction to the former long courses such as the German *Diplom*. However, as is well known, the UK already had in place a Bachelor's and Master's degree structure consisting of a three-year first cycle degree plus a one-calendar-year Master's for England, Wales and Northern Ireland (EWNI) (3+1), and a four-year first cycle degree plus the same one-calendar-year second cycle degree for Scotland (4+1). The implementation of a Bachelor's and Master's structure is a major policy objective for many EU member states, but this division existed in the UK

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[4] Berlin Communiqé of Ministers. http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/en/communique_minister/index.htm/ Accessed 16.12.2011.

[5] A Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area. http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/en/communique_minister/index.htm/ Accessed 6.12.2011.

long before the advent of Bologna, and the country was in the vanguard when it came to credit points and modularisation. Already in 1997, even before the Sorbonne Declaration (1998),[6] the UK *Dearing Report* had recommended the adoption of a common credit transfer system; therefore its introduction cannot be attributed to any Bologna Process. In fact, other countries copied the UK rather than vice versa.

In general, *Bekhradnia (2004, p. 3)* is somewhat skeptical about the whole credit-pointing process, pointing out that much UK transfer takes place without any such formality: "In 2002–03, over 11,000 of the 300,000 plus students who entered higher education institutions did so having been at a different institution in one of the preceding two years. However, it is believed that most of these students received no credit for their previous studies." He also believes that credit transfer is stalling as a mechanism: "The proportion of four-year students transferring from a college has reduced from 40 per cent to 30 per cent in the past decade. Many college students are unable to secure the transfer place that they expected – in 2002 more than 25 per cent of eligible students did not secure the place they sought" *(ibid., p. 8).* He regards the ambition in Europe to create generic, all embracing, systems as a chimera "because of the generality of the ambition, levels, level descriptors, and compatible quality assurance arrangements that need to be developed, running the risk that the whole edifice will topple over because of its complication" *(ibid., p. 13).* Such complications "make it more likely that CATS will not play a major role in the development of higher education in Europe. And even if common systems are developed, universities will always need to make *ad hominem (and ad feminam!)* decisions about the admission of individual students" *(ibid., p. 14).* In summary, then, it appears that within the British system, the benefits claimed for CATS are often not available in practice, and this applies particularly to the widespread movement of students between universities and the accumulation of credits for lifelong learning. But this is a problem for the ECTS system as a whole, and not just for Britain. If such problems are experienced within a national system with a robust, well-developed National Qualifications Framework, then they probably also apply to transfer between the Bologna nations.

2.2   The Diploma Supplement

UK compliance is still partial in relation to the Diploma Supplement (DS) which the 2003 Berlin Communiqué[7] wanted every student graduating as from 2005 to receive "automatically and free of charge". In 2007, the UK European Unit[8] indicated that only

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[6] The Sorbonne Declaration. http://www.moveonnet.eu/institutions/documents/bologna/sorbonne_declaration. pdf/view/ Accessed 17.12.2011

[7] The Berlin Communiqué (2003) Realising the European Higher Education Area. http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/030919Berlin_Communique.PDF/ Accessed 16.12.2011.

[8] UK European Unit. http://www.europeunit.ac.uk/ Accessed 16.12.2011.

60 per cent of respondent institutions currently issued the DS, and urged British higher education institutions (HEIs) to proceed with issuing the Diploma Supplement as soon as possible. The Bologna Process Stocktaking Report *(Rauhvargers/Deane/ Pauwels 2009, p. 121)* in its "traffic light score cards" of EHEA compliance rated EWNI amber/yellow in "stage of implementation of DS". Scotland, by contrast, was rated green. However, motivation to use the Diploma Supplement was probably reduced by the fact that British students were already issued with "Transcripts" which detail their final achievements: ergo, a form of certification was already in place in the UK that pre-dated the Diploma Supplement, so here again the Bologna requirements were anticipated, and cannot be attributed to the Process.

2.3   National Qualifications Framework

On 23.4.2008 the European Parliament and Council of Europe agreed to establish a European Qualification Framework (EQF) in order to promote equality of opportunity and the integration of the European labour market. By 2008, however, the UK had long ago taken action upon the issue. In the 1997 *Dearing Report*, a national framework for higher education qualifications was proposed to help students and employers compare the many hundreds of qualifications available in EWNI. Originally, a National Qualification Framework (NQF) for school, vocational and occupational awards was introduced and in 2001, a university equivalent to the NQF was published, the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ), which was updated again in 2008 (there are separate EWNI and Scottish versions). The fundamental premise of the FHEQ is that qualifications should be awarded on the basis of *outcomes and attainment* rather than years of study, and it is intended that these credit frameworks should also support a consistent approach to academic standards across the higher education sector. The FHEQ is explicitly Bologna-compliant, and intended to be so; it is designed to meet the expectations of the Bologna Declaration and thus align with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA). A European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF*)* has also been agreed by the European Commission and it is intended that the FHEQ will be compatible with this framework too. Subject benchmark statements have been produced for typical and threshold standards in Bachelor's degrees. According to *EACEA (2010, p. 23),* the UK is one of only eight higher education systems that now have a fully self-certified NQF. However, its development long pre-dated Bologna.

3   Quality Assurance

The EU Ministers have developed the "Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) in the European Higher Education Area"[9] that were accepted at the Bergen conference in 2005; and half of the 22 country agencies for Quality Assurance (QA) that now exist were set up since 2005 *(EACEA 2010).* The UK, however, presides over a system of QA which has its roots in the Thatcherite neo-liberal "Revolution" that, on the one hand, de-regulated HE through marketisation but, on the other hand, sought to uphold standards by introducing system-wide QA processes in order to make the universities more accountable for the money they received from the public purse. A formal precedent for the judgement of quality in higher education already existed in the regulation of the polytechnics by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) founded in 1965; and in 1992, the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) was established to perform the same function for universities. In the 1980s, the British government decided to create a "market" in higher education, and did away with grants in favour of a system of contracts between the HEIs and the funding body, designed to secure the delivery of educational services. It deliberately increased the number of students without a commensurate increase in funding, which posed a potential threat to quality by lowering the "unit of resource" (the amount of funding per student) *(Universities UK 2008; Pritchard 1994).* In those circumstances of decreased resources, the regulation of quality was a way of "policing" the HEIs, and monitoring any deterioration. To avoid this, academics had to put in increased effort. By the advent of the Bologna Declaration in 1999, therefore, the UK *already* had long-standing and significant experience of quality mechanisms through the CNAA and HEQC. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), which superseded them both, was established in April 1997; it is tasked with assessing how institutions fulfil their duties to maintain standards, and reports publicly on the level of confidence that can be placed in them. It had its first European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) membership review in April 2008 during which the review team reported that it was "consistently impressed by the calibre and professionalism of all those contributing to the work of the QAA in maintaining quality and standards across HE in the UK". It has, however, often been perceived as both adversarial and ineffective by those within the system *(Alderman 1996).*

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[9] European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance. http://www.eqar.eu/application/requirements/european-standards-and-guidelines.html/ Accessed 2.2.2012

4   Student mobility

According to the Leuven Communiqué,[10] the official target of the EHEA is that by 2020 at least 20 per cent of those graduating in the area should have had a study or training period abroad *(EACEA 2010)*. No doubt enhanced by the world dominance of the English language, the UK is a popular destination for students from abroad but its own outward mobility is woefully under-developed, and it does not even have any set target numbers for its own home students to study abroad. In fact, there is approximately a 1:25 imbalance in the number of UK students choosing to study abroad compared with those coming to the UK, which demonstrates how far removed the British are from European area targets. About 500,000 international students come to the UK every year, while the flow in the other direction is between 15,000 and 20,000, though it is difficult to obtain accurate figures. Of these outwardly mobile students, most are studying modern languages, and the majority tend to come from the higher socioeconomic classes, and to include a higher than expected proportion of women amongst them *(Bone 2008)*. Martin Davidson, Chief Executive of the British Council, has stated that more must be done to make student mobility an integral part of UK universities' relationship with their international partners. It is clear that the current favourable indicators on UK inward mobility of students encourage complacency and mask underlying problems; and the 2009 Bologna Stocktaking Report *(Rauhvargers/Deane/Pauwels 2009, p. 121)* lists the following as a future challenge for EWNI: it needs to aim for "a more proactive approach to inter-cultural dialogue and understanding, both national and international". However, given the short degree courses in EWNI (leaving less time available for study abroad), the burden of student fees (leading to a need to get into the labour market quickly and repay loans), and restricted command of foreign languages (possibly resulting in low intercultural competence), it is difficult to make study abroad an attractive option for large numbers of British students. It is worth noting, however, that mobility targets generally within the EHEA are not being met. There was no substantial increase in the period up to 2007, and by 2007, a mere two per cent of EHEA learners were pursuing a degree in another EHEA country *(Westerheijden et al. 2010)*.

5   The social dimension of higher education

The London Communiqué of May 2007 defined the objective of the social dimension as follows: "We share the societal aspiration that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our

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[10] Leuven Communiqé (2009). http://ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/conference/documents/ Leuven_Louvain-la-Neuve_Communiqué_April_2009.pdf/ Accessed 10.2.2012

populations."[11] There are large differences among countries in the extent to which students from a blue-collar background participate in higher education. In most countries, there is strong socio-economic selection into HE: in Germany, the United Kingdom, Austria and France, students whose fathers hold a university degree are about twice as likely to be in higher education as their proportion in the population would suggest *(OECD 2008, p. 139).* On average in the EU-19 countries, 25 per cent of the 20–29 year-old population was enrolled in tertiary education in 2007 *(OECD 2009).* British participation rates compare favourably with EU averages: for English domiciled 17–30 year olds at UK HEIs, and at English, Scottish and Welsh further education institutions, have increased to 45 per cent for 2008/09; and in Northern Ireland the Age Participation Index based upon the 18 year-old population was 50.7 per cent *(HEFCE 2010, para. 23).* It does remain true that there is a substantial socio-economic gap between the highest and the lowest social classes participating in HE. Over one in two young people in the most advantaged areas goes to university, compared with under 20 per cent of the least advantaged (estimated for 2009/10); but the figure of 20 per cent represents progress compared with the 13 per cent that prevailed in the mid-1990s *(ibid., para. 27).* Disadvantaged young people are 50 per cent more likely to enter HE now than they were 15 years previously (1994/95), and the increases for their group are proportionately greater than for their more privileged counterparts. It has also been found that young people from ethnic minority backgrounds are overwhelmingly more likely to enter UK HE compared to white people with the same prior attainment.[12] *Bekhradnia (2003)* shows that whilst in 1970 the higher social groups were *more than six times* more likely to participate in higher education than the lower groups, this ratio had reduced to *just less than three times* by 2000. Though previously disadvantaged groups are now participating quite well in UK higher education, Sir Malcolm Grant, Chair of the Russell Group of research-intensive "selective" universities, emphasises that efforts to tackle access to HE on the part of poor students must be made at a very early stage when children are still at school. The UK is doing well in this social dimension of HE, and this may be due to flexibility of its structures and the fact that the British labour market was traditionally less based upon credentialism than say in France or Germany.

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[11] London Communiqué (2007) Towards the European Higher Education Area: responding to challenges in a globalised world. http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/MDC/London_Communique18May2007.pdf. Accessed 15.12.2011

[12] Higher Education Participation: An Analysis of the Relationship between Prior Attainment and Young Participation by Gender, Socio-Economic Class and Ethnicity. http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/DIUS-RR-08-14.pdf/ Accessed 14.6.2010. Material is now in the National Archives and has to be specially requested.

6   Lifelong learning

In relation to lifelong earning (LLL), the fact that there is no widely accepted European or international definition has hindered the development of coherent policies *(EACEA 2010, p. 34)*. Obviously, it is possible for individuals to continue to acquire qualifications throughout their lifetime within the formal education system, but in the context of social justice, it is more useful to link LLL with non-traditional education. *Orr (2008, p. 41)* defines "non-traditional" as "access to higher education through the validation of prior learning and work experience – with or without a higher education entrance examination". However, the concept of participation is beginning to expand and move away from referring exclusively to HE access towards encompassing successful completion of studies in *all* cycles of higher education. The emphasis upon competencies and outcomes in HE is especially strong in British HE; it is sympathetic to non-formal education in that it puts the onus upon the learner to demonstrate what he or she knows, understands and can do rather than upon the credentials that he or she holds. The national qualification frameworks are intended to help validate learning outcomes that have been reached by a variety of routes, and are crucial for widening access. According to the European Commission and Hochschul-Informations-System *(EC/HIS 2009)* the share of students who enter higher education via non-traditional routes of accreditation (specifically prior learning and work experience) amounted to much less than twelve per cent in most countries for which data were available. However, the proportion of students entering HE by non-traditional routes was the highest in England and Wales where it stood at 15 per cent.

7   The economic crisis in higher education

In the UK, there has been considerable tension between the charging of fees to undergraduate students and the desire to achieve social justice. Before 1997 no tuition fees were charged, and there were grants for poorer students. However, under the impact of neo-liberalism, pressure increased to make universities less dependent upon state funding, and to pass on a proportion of HE costs to students and their parents. In 1997, the *Dearing Report* proposed that all undergraduate students should pay a £1,000 tuition fee towards the cost of their degrees, and in 1998, amidst intense political controversy, the Labour government accepted this principle: it introduced means-tested fees and replaced grants with loans. The Higher Education Act of 2004 introduced the concept of variable tuition fees, and in order to ensure that potential students would not be deterred from entering HE by financial stringency, the Act established the regulatory Office of Fair Access (OFFA) whose mission is to "…ensure that the introduction of variable fees does not have a detrimental effect on widening

participation."[13] HEIs wishing to charge more than the basic fee must submit an "access agreement" which OFFA will either approve, reject or require to be amended.

Currently, the British economy is in deficit, and needs to trim £6.2 billion from the national budget, so for the financial year 2010–2011, the Higher Education Funding Council for England announced a cut of £449 million; the total funding is £7.36 billion which is 7.2 per cent down on the previous year *(Smith 2010)*. A further £600 million will be cut between 2011 and 2013, and overall, HE will have to lose up to 40 per cent of its current budget by 2015. In fact, the unit of resource in 2008–09 was only 83 per cent of what it had been in 1989, and many fear that this will undermine the sustainability of the sector: the Association of Graduate Recruiters condemns the government as having driven down standards, devalued the currency of a degree and damaged the quality of the university experience. Public funds are intended to flow to the STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), whereas teaching grants to arts, humanities and social sciences have been removed. The association of Vice Chancellors and Principals, Universities UK, states that British public expenditure on higher education as a percentage of GDP is one of the lowest in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD);[14] and *Marginson (2011, p. 30)* believes that the withdrawal of public subsidies from humanities and social science programmes in English higher education "has sent shock waves around the world".

The funding shortfall is to be made up by the students and their families, according to the Browne Report. In 2010, an independent Panel on HE funding and student finance in England, chaired by Lord Browne of Madingley, recommended a large increase in fees, the main purpose being to put the HE system on a more sustainable footing by seeking higher contributions from those individuals that can afford to make them.[15] Browne refrained from recommending an upper limit, because he believed that there was "no robust way" to identify what it should be, and that a cap would distort charging by institutions. Serious problems, however, arose in relation to the charging of fees in English universities. The government discarded Lord Browne's advice and set an upper limit of £9,000 for the academic session 2012–13, expecting that only a limited number of universities would charge that figure. But the majority of HEIs announced their intention to charge the maximum, so the government then issued a *White Paper (2011)* in which they made English universities compete against each other for students. About a quarter of all places, ca. 85,000, are to be open to

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[13] Office for Fair Access. http://www.offa.org.uk/about/ Accessed 10.2.2012.

[14] Universities UK Facts and Figures. http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/PolicyAndResearch/PolicyAreas/Data-Analysis/Facts-and-Figures/Pages/default.aspx/ Accessed 10.12.2011.

[15] Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education: an Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance (2010). http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/corporate/docs/s/10-1208-securing-sustainable-higher-education-browne-report.pdf/ Accessed 21.5. 2011.

full competition, relaxing the strict controls on the numbers that each university is allowed to accept (with fines for over-recruitment). Of these 85,000, 20,000 places are available for institutions charging course fees of £7,500, but the HEIs must bid for these 20,000 students on the basis of quality, value for money, and student demand. The rest of the places (65,000) will be allocated to high-achieving students with A-level grades of A+A+B who will be able to go to the most elite universities: this is likely to squeeze the middle-ranking universities that also charge high fees as they will be unable to attract the best-performing students and will lose places overall. It will privilege "cheap" institutions, including further education and even *schools*, that can offer degrees at low prices, thereby rewarding low pricing. It will have the effect of stratifying the sector, as there is already reason to believe that an elite group of just ten institutions has 40 per cent of all A+A+B students *(Morgan 2011, p. 6)*. The situation contrasts with Germany where fees have now been abolished in almost all federal states and the federal government has provided an additional € 800 million to support growing student numbers until 2015.[16]

8   Discussion of British Exceptionalism in Higher Education

In this final section, a discussion will be undertaken of respects in which Britain conforms with Bologna, and of ways in which it diverges or seems likely to diverge from it. Reasons for British distance from the Process will be considered.

8.1   Isomorphism between British Higher Education and the Bologna Process

Technically, the UK is reasonably well aligned with the Bologna Process. With small reservations about the Diploma Supplement, the country has effectively implemented use of the Bologna tools. It was a pioneer of quality assurance as a counter-balance to neoliberal financial autonomy within HEIs. It is a net importer of international students, though the Anglocentric culture makes students reluctant to undertake a period of study abroad. The recruitment of disadvantaged students has significantly increased in recent years, contributing to achievement of the social dimension of Bologna policy. The UK is well ahead of most other countries in the proportion of students recruited with non-traditional qualifications, thereby contributing to lifelong learning. In relation to the economic crisis, it is certainly true that the UK is cutting the budget for HE students but *Estermann/Bennetot Pruvot (2011, p. 28)* demonstrate that many other countries are doing the same, and that many governments have reneged on previous commitments to increase HE funding.

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[16] EUA – European University Association (2011). Impact of the economic crisis on European universities (January 2011). http://www.eua.be/Libraries/Newsletter/Economic_monitoringJanuary2011final.sflb. ashx. PDF file Accessed 2.2.2012.

The evidence for British conformity to Bologna is very strong, and does not support the concept of exceptionalism. Yet as the present article has shown, many of the developments that we have described above took place independently of Bologna, and were instigated much earlier than in most EHEA countries. It is more appropriate to regard British developments as *coinciding with Bologna* rather than complying with it. No doubt, this is because the Bologna Process pushes EHEA HEIs in the direction of increased neoliberalism which began earlier in the UK than in most other countries, and is still being pursued intensively there. However, the coincidence is more due to isomorphism than to causality, being a matter of similar *fit* rather than one-way influence. *Smith and Adams (2009, p. 252)* define "isomorphism" as "a reflexive interplay between state, university and academics that leads to similar organisational outcomes in different locations". The EHEA and Bologna have moved closer to the UK rather than vice versa in a movement that is mimetic (relating to imitation) rather than normative or coercive (see *Di Maggio/Powell 1983).* Due to the Open Method of Coordination, the drive for harmonisation is rarely coercive within the EHEA; yet it co-exists with underlying normative notions about academic identity and the pursuit of knowledge; this leads to intrinsic tensions and "mission stretch" in which institutions venture outside their traditional beliefs and ways of doing things *(Musselin 2010).* This "stretch" has long been prevalent within the UK.

8.2   Developments that sit uncomfortably with Bologna

The Bologna developments outlined above co-exist with some that do not mesh easily with the Process. These mainly relate to the length of British courses and to attempts to make the delivery of HE cost-effective and cheap. British degrees, both at first cycle and at second cycle, are already compact. Now, members of the Coalition government, notably Vince Cable, the Liberal Democrat Business Secretary, wish to popularise two-year degrees at BA level, not necessarily as a universal structure, but as a way of cutting costs and getting graduates out onto the job market more quickly. Students are also being encouraged to live at home in order to avoid running up debts, and this will tie them to local institutions rather than encouraging them to seek a diversity of experience by going further afield. It may result in a narrowing of life experience and a lack of maturity through prolonged dependence on parents. Two-year degrees were first introduced at the private University of Buckingham of which Mrs Thatcher became Chancellor; the fact that it was Great Britain's first private university chimed with her commitment to entrepreneurial values (see *Pritchard 1998* for a comparison of the Universities of Buckingham and Witten-Herdecke). Such degrees are now touted as a way of reducing expenses in the state sector, and are being introduced on an experimental basis, for example at the University of Plymouth where students will be required to work a longer academic year, over three terms rather than two semesters. There is no doubt that the average university experience will inevitably become

leaner and more focused on results as a consequence of these trends. Free-ranging intellectual enquiry at first degree level will not be possible for most students, and the norm will be a goal-directed approach geared to fulfilling requirements, passing exams and finding work.

With Master's degrees, it is possible to do a taught programme complete with dissertation in twelve calendar months which contrasts with longer courses in Continental Europe. Although the Bologna Process does not specify particular minimum lengths of time for a Master's, the brevity of British qualifications engenders mistrust in certain quarters and is out of line with many European comparators where second cycle programmes last at least two years (see *Stensaker/Gornitzka (2009)* for an interesting discussion of trust in HE). There is concern in Europe that the UK's one-year Master's programme is "lightweight" in terms of hours studied and is therefore incompatible with Bologna requirements. *Brennan et al. (2009)* indicate that UK students already study for fewer hours than some European counterparts (e.g., about 30 hours a week compared with 42 hours in France). British study periods seem excessively rushed and compressed to many EHEA observers, and this impression of "short-study" is strengthened by developments such as the undergraduate Foundation Degrees which take two years, and may entitle a person to enter the final year of an Honours degree. However, the short programmes are being vigorously defended on the grounds that what matters is the academic result rather than the time spent in study. The UK approach focuses on the outcomes of study programmes rather than workload. In fact, European policy is now following this action line, in keeping with the Dublin Descriptors (2004)[17] that attach generic learning outcomes to each of the cycles which successful students are expected to attain.[18] These Descriptors were agreed by the eight-nation Joint Quality Initiative in which Scottish and English officers of the QAA participated. The UK Europe Unit currently stresses that the designation "Master" specifies nothing precise with regard to duration, workload, credit rating, mode of attendance and delivery, professional accreditation, pedagogic approach, ease of access to and from BA/MA and doctoral programmes (either cross-border or in-country).[19] It further emphasizes that UK HE qualifications frameworks are "fully compatible" with Bologna and that they consolidate the currency of UK qualifications throughout Europe: these

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[17] Shared 'Dublin' descriptors for Short Cycle, First Cycle, Second Cycle and Third Cycle Awards.
http://www.uni-due.de/imperia/md/content/bologna/dublin_descriptors.pdf/ Accessed 16.12.2011

[18] In the Berlin Communiqué (September 2003), Ministers referred to an overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area in terms of the academic demands of a programme rather than of the period of time spent pursuing it.
Ministers encourage the member States to elaborate a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications for their higher education systems, which should seek to describe qualifications in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profile. They also undertake to elaborate an overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area.

[19] The European Higher Education Area: celebrating a decade of engagement (UK Europe Unit).
http://ehea.europeunit.ac.uk/sites/ehea/action_lines/three_cycle.cfm/ Accessed 14.12.2011.

are touted as marketing advantages. *Bekhradnia (2004)* of the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) also champions the *output* focus against the predominant ECTS *input* focus of awarding credit in recognition of time served. He suggests that the UK students are better prepared for their studies at point of entry because the specialist A-level leaving certificate gives more depth of knowledge albeit over a narrower spectrum. He argues that the one-year Master's has also been successful among European and international students and employers alike, and claims that it also supports the Bologna objective of promoting non-traditional and flexible learning paths in an era of lifelong learning.

8.3   British exceptionalism revisited

Although the British do not really manifest "exceptionalism" in relation to the Bologna Process, this is coincidence rather than compliance or causality. The fact that they were in the vanguard of developments that subsequently became mainstream policy within the EHEA probably caused a certain measure of indifference or complacency on their part. True, the UK was one of the four founding signatories to the Sorbonne Declaration, but the Bologna Process that evolved out of it had little impact on British HE for a long time, and most of the major developments that took place in the UK cannot be attributed to it. The country already had the BA/MA structure in place before it became European policy; and unlike some other countries (such as Germany), it did not need Bologna's help in solving domestic problems such as excessively long degree completion periods.

The two main factors that can be singled out for a deeper exploration of "exceptionalism" are the shortening of degree courses and the raising of England's university fees. The short courses can be defended on the grounds that they achieve their intended outcomes, though they are often based upon Mode 2 knowledge.[20] It cannot be denied that the system still delivers quality, albeit within a spectrum that is sometimes narrow. In the 2011 *Times Higher* World University Rankings, the UK has 32 HEIs in the top 200, Germany and the Netherlands have twelve each, France, Sweden and Japan have five each, Spain has one, Italy has none, and the USA dominates at 75 *(THE, 6.10.2011, p. 5).*[21] Admittedly, the countries vary in size, but these figures tell their own story; and the criteria are based upon 1) teaching, 2) industry income/innovation, 3) international outlook, 4) research and 5) citations/research influence – so a broad range of indicators.

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[20] This type of knowledge is multidisciplinary and problem-based, tested against the criteria of usefulness and relevance. It contrasts with Mode 1 knowledge modality which is the traditional, disciplinary way of creating knowledge, with truth as the touchstone *(Gibbons et al. 1994).*

[21] However, an article by *Li/Shankar/Tang (2011)* argues that adjusting for income, population size, R & D spend, and the national language, the USA is actually underperforming by about 410%.

The fees and the funding stratagems are what really set the UK apart from other European countries. It is true that other countries have also imposed draconian cuts on their universities, but the British state is now refusing to finance non-STEM subjects at all, and English higher education has become the most expensive in Europe. In this respect, the country has gone its own way regardless of any disapproval that may be forthcoming from across the Channel or from the OECD.[22] The question arises of why this should be so, and three main reasons will be proposed. The first is historical: the UK underwent the process leading to neoliberalism much earlier and more radically than most other EU countries. The New Managerialism and marketisation took place intensively from the early 1980s onwards under the Conservative government of Mrs Margaret Thatcher *(Deem/Hillyard/Reed 2008; Brown 2010)*.[23] They were all the easier to achieve in a climate of British pragmatism and in the absence of a written Constitution (compare the German Basic Law that champions the freedom of teaching and learning). Their implementation created a legacy of bitterness between the government and the universities such that Oxford University refused to confer an honorary doctorate upon Mrs Thatcher in 1985, because of the way in which her government had handled educational policy and educational funding. When she left power, Geoffrey Howe, the Parliamentarian who had been a direct cause of her fall from power, said of his former leader: "Her real triumph was to have transformed not just one Party but two, so that when Labour did eventually return, the great bulk of Thatcherism was accepted as irreversible."[24] Policies based upon competition, marketisation and entrepreneurship became bipartisan, and have been progressively applied to universities ever since.

A second reason for exceptionalism about fees and funding may reside in policy contagion: In many respects Britain wants to emulate the US *(Finegold/McFarland/Richardson 1992; 1993)* and because of the linguistic, ex-colonial and diplomatic relations between the two countries, it stands in a field of force that differs from that of mainland European countries; indeed, it is pulled between two forces of attraction – Europe and America. *Marginson (2009, pp. 317)* states: "[T]he assumption that UK universities are strategically integrated into the common EHEA is difficult to justify. Higher education is poised between the European project in HE and the idea of a partnership of equals with the US (though the US shows no sign of wanting such a partnership)."

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[22] It should be noted that the other countries of the UK have different fee arrangements to those for England.

[23] *Deem/Hillyard/Reed (2008, pages 2 and 4)* use the more general term New Managerialism (NM) and locate the term New Public Management (NPM) within it. *Deem/Hillyard/Reed* regard NM and NPM as two separate but linked components of a cultural-cum-policy paradigm that provides the overarching ideological framework within which public services can be reformed.

[24] Margaret Thatcher. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret_Thatcher/ Accessed 15.12.2011.

A final reason for apparent exceptionalism is that many Britishers frankly dislike the European Union, seeing in it a threat to national independence and sovereignty. The present Conservative Party is riven by conflict over Europe, and many members of Parliament wish for a referendum that might provide the basis for the UK to withdraw from the EU. Their hostility is mitigated by the more Europhile attitude of the Liberal Democrat Coalition partners. The recent financial crises of EU member countries such as Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece, and Spain pose a real threat to the future of monetary union, and with it a threat to the political stability of the European project. In the circumstances, the temptation is for the British to go their own way; and in higher education the Open Method of Coordination tends to encourage a belief in divergence and *laissez faire* which is congenial to them.

Historically speaking, the direction of influence has been greater from Britain towards Continental "Europe" rather than vice versa. Conformity to Bologna may confer an opportunistic marketing "plus" but a combination of policy contagion, political expediency and financial exigency have limited the ability of the Process to influence HE domestic policy, and this state of affairs looks set to continue.

Acknowledgement

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