Introduction

After the Second World War until the early 1960s the English Higher Education system was dominated by the traditional universities, of which there were at that time 24. The University Governing Council (UGC) that always had a formidable force protecting the autonomy of the universities was still strong, but the influence of the state was growing constantly. Then during the early 1960s important changes occurred. The Robbins committee made far-reaching proposals for changes in the higher education system. The proposals of the Robbins committee meant the end of the system of autonomous, elite universities that had existed in the centuries before. Most importantly, growth, both in the university sector and in other types of advanced learning, was stimulated (Fulton, 1991; Scott, 1995). In the 1970s the developments started off by the Robbins committee were taken further. The polytechnics grew in importance and the department of Education and Science decided that national co-ordination was necessary to control the system. The polytechnics had until then been locally governed schools, but at that time started to move to the national level, co-ordinated by the National Advisory Board (NAB). Then after 1981, as a consequence of budget cuts, the UGC lost its credibility as an advocate for university interests. The position of the UGC became very weak because of its obvious inability to protect the universities from the sudden and major financial cuts. At the end of 1980s both the NAB and the UGC were abolished. They were replaced by the University Funding Council (UFC) and the Polytechnic and College Funding Council (PCFC). For the universities this meant a definite loss of autonomy, for the polytechnics and colleges it represented full nationalisation and greater operational freedom. The two systems were finally merged into one system of 97 institutions in 1992. The Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 allowed all higher education institutions in England and Wales which satisfied prescribed criteria to apply for permission to include the word ‘university’ in their titles. All polytechnics did so. The UFC and PCFC were replaced by councils with a responsibility for the Higher Education system within their regions (England, Scotland and Wales).

Although the two systems have merged, this does not mean that chartered universities (the universities that were labelled university before 1992) and former polytechnics have become completely similar. On a formal level there is one system, but looking at what actually happens in the universities there are still considerable differences.
Although there is nowadays no formal distinction between the types of higher education institutions, the following table (table 12.1) gives some insight in the size of the sector(s) before and after 1992.

**Table 12.1: Student numbers in polytechnics and universities 1988-1996**

<table>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Universities</td>
<td>285,372</td>
<td>316,664</td>
<td>375,587</td>
<td>1,231,988</td>
<td>1,308,765</td>
<td>1,392,607</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polytechnics</td>
<td>430,628</td>
<td>625,720</td>
<td>779,333</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

In the English system, universities are allowed to select their students. Although there are minimum standards prescribed by the government, in practice, because of the competition for places, most institutions require levels of qualifications considerably above the minimum. These requirements may be expressed in the number of passes or in the grades to be obtained. Alternative qualifications, including qualifications in vocational education, are becoming increasingly acceptable. In order to better accommodate the increasing range of possible qualifications at this level, a UK-wide university admissions framework will be introduced in 2002. Most institutions also welcome applications from mature candidates who have had appropriate experience but may lack formal qualifications.

There is a wide variety in the rigorousness of the selection. This variety is not just binary, in the sense that chartered universities are much more selective that former polytechnics, there is also a lot of variety within the group of chartered universities and former polytechnics. Also within universities there are different degrees of selectivity among departments. However, when looking at the Times league table (Time Higher Education supplement) it becomes clear that, on average, former polytechnics have lower entrance requirements than chartered universities. All former polytechnics score in lowest 50% with regard to their entrance requirements. In addition to their lower entrance requirements, many polytechnics offer a preparatory year-long course for people that do not meet the entrance requirements. Recently there have been discussions that the more prestigious universities are not taking in enough students who have working experience instead of A-levels.

**Structural characteristics**

*Programmes and degrees*

The length of programmes in former polytechnics and chartered universities is uniform (undergraduate education lasts three years and graduate education is one year long for a Master’s and three years long for a PhD degree). Both types of universities are allowed to offer undergraduate and graduate courses. Universities are free to decide on the names of their degrees. The most common degrees are Bachelor of Arts (BA) and Bachelor of Science (BSc). There is more diversity in the Master’s titles. There is a wide variety, including the Master of Arts (MA), Master of Science (MSc), Master of Business...
Administration (MBA), Master of Education (MEd), Master of Social Work (MSW), Master of Musical Arts (AMusM), Master of Medical Sciences (MMedSci) and the Master of Philosophy (MPhil). The degree awarded for a doctoral course is normally that of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD or, at a few universities, DPhil), regardless of the field of study of the research, except for a few specialised fields as in the case of the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts, AMusD (Eurydice, 1999).

Although chartered universities and former polytechnics have rights to offer all these courses, there are still differences. On the whole, polytechnics tend to be more aimed at professional courses and chartered universities more at academic courses. The chartered universities offer more Master’s and doctoral courses than do the polytechnics. There are, however, some factors that make polytechnics and chartered universities similar. In the first place, there is a professional drift in universities. Compared to the Netherlands, there are a growing number of courses offered at chartered universities that are not strictly academic but prepare for professions. In the second place, with the merging of the two systems, polytechnics gained the right to offer Master’s and PhD programmes, and these degrees are more aimed at academic achievement than the traditional courses offered at polytechnics. Finally, the stringent divide between what is professional and what is academic has loosened. Academic skills have become a necessity in many professional jobs. All this has led to “a considerable confusion about the meaning of qualifications awarded by UK higher education institutions. Though half of UK employers recruit employees with HEQs (Higher Education Qualifications) and half of those responsible have qualifications themselves, only a third feel they have a reasonable understanding of HEQs.” (Report into UK employers’ understanding of qualifications awarded by HE institutions, 2000)

Other system characteristics

Finance and personnel
Since the unification of the Higher Education system in the UK, both chartered universities and polytechnics have been financed for research and teaching. The research in the former polytechnics has grown, but only marginally. This is partly due to the fact that the employees of the polytechnics were formerly only teaching staff and that research was only a very limited (if at all) part of their job, i.e. many employees have little experience in research. These starting problems are worsened by the English funding system for research in which past quality has important implications for the level of funding an institute receives. The former polytechnics are therefore caught in a vicious circle. There are no resources (money, personnel) to do excellent research and because there is no excellent research, there is no money available to gain these resources. Former polytechnics that attempt to start research usually try to establish themselves in small niches in which they invest money. On the whole, this makes the former polytechnics still mostly teaching institutions, albeit with sometimes some small research institutes attached to them. The chartered universities have a long tradition as institutions which combine research and teaching.
Minimum qualifications for teachers at universities are similar for all universities, i.e. there is no formal binary divide here. It is true, however, that before 1992 there were important and significant differences between personnel at polytechnics and chartered universities. In 1992 Halsey (1992) showed that “42% of the university teachers secured a first class honours degree from their first institution of higher education, compared with 16% of the polytechnic staff, and while 69% of those teaching at universities hold a doctorate, the percentage among the polytechnic staff is only 32.” Clearly eight years is not enough to equalise the entire Higher Education sector. Furthermore, this process has been slowed down by the differences in status—the older universities are perceived as more interesting places to work for teachers and researchers holding a doctorate.

Quality assurance
Concerning quality evaluation, higher education institutions are required to undertake institutional self-assessment in each subject offered. This self-assessment is intended to inform the preparation and conduct of the assessment visit made as part of the national-level review of performance at institutional and programme levels. The self-assessment should include an evaluation of the quality of the student learning experience and student achievement, measured against the aims and objectives that the ‘subject provider’ (which normally equates to a department or a faculty within the institution) sets for the education of its students in that subject. In these self-evaluations, chartered universities and former polytechnics can use their own criteria, which allows for a diverse system of universities including an informal binary divide.

On top of this self-evaluation, there are a number of bodies engaged in the evaluation of higher education. The Quality Assurance Agency, which is an independent body funded by subscriptions from universities and colleges of higher education, carries out subject reviews and institutional audits under contract to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW). In Northern Ireland, the agency responsible for the evaluation of quality in higher education teaching and research is the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment (DHFETE), advised by the Northern Ireland Higher Education Council and the QAA. Initial teacher training is inspected in England by OFSTED, in Wales by Estyn, and in Northern Ireland by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). The funding councils and DHFETE periodically conduct a research assessment exercise to judge the quality of research (Eurydice, 1999). These judgements are based on generalised academic standards “Judgments are made on the academic standards in each subject under scrutiny. (…) These judgements focus on whether intended learning outcomes are appropriate and whether the outcomes achieved are consistent with the intentions” (QAA, 2000). These generalised standards may be a drive for former polytechnics to develop in the direction of the chartered universities.

Regarding the outcomes of these quality evaluations it becomes very clear that there are still clear differences between former polytechnics and chartered universities. In the Times league table, the best scoring former polytechnic (Oxford Brooks) is ranked 52 of the 97 universities presented in the table. In
other words the best 50% of universities are all chartered universities. The low scores are mostly due to very low scores on the quality evaluation of research at these institutions. On teaching most polytechnics score average.

**Output**

Employer satisfaction with the students that finish either chartered universities or former polytechnics is difficult to measure, and since 1992 there have been no real studies that compare chartered universities and former polytechnics. Harvey and Knight (1997) conclude, “in general employers express satisfaction with the graduates they have recruited.”

Notwithstanding these results, the government has engaged in several schemes to make Higher Education more sensitive to the needs of industry. Since 1987 there is the Enterprise in Higher Education programme with the explicit objective to encourage the qualities of enterprise amongst those seeking for higher education qualifications (MSC, 1987). More recently the DfEE and the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) launched the ‘Higher Education Reach-out to Business and the Community Fund’ in June 1999. This scheme seeks to encourage higher education institutions in England and Northern Ireland to respond to the needs of business and to contribute to economic growth and competitiveness, whilst improving opportunities for graduate employment, through innovative proposals. Separate measures exist in Wales and Scotland.

In conclusion, although there is no direct information on the satisfaction of employers concerning chartered universities and former polytechnics, there is a clear indication that government wants universities to teach more skills and knowledge that is useful for industry. Since these policies are aimed at both types of universities this is yet another push towards uniformity.

**Recent developments**

**Dearing report**

An important macro-development that may lead to more uniformity in the English Higher Education system is that following a recommendation by the Dearing Report, the QAA is currently developing a National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education in the United Kingdom. This framework will allow for the establishment of a common currency for credit accumulation and transfer in the sector. The development of such a common framework for credit transfer and accumulation in the entire system of Higher Education (including all institutions) may be an extra push towards uniformity of the system.

As for recent European developments, the Bologna declaration will presumably have no impact on the English Higher Education system. The English system already conforms with the system proposed in this declaration.
Conclusion

Since 1992 the Higher Education system in the UK is no longer binary. Formally there is no division between polytechnics and chartered universities. However, there are still many indications that there remains an informal binary system. Former polytechnics are less rigorous in their selection of students, they are much less engaged in research and they all score in the bottom 50% of the times Higher education league-table. It is so far unclear how the system will develop, but there seem to be forces that work against the informal binary divide. In the first place, the universities are all evaluated by the same standards. As these evaluations have repercussions for the funding of the institutions, one might expect growing conformity to these standards. Secondly, since 1987 the English government has attempted to increase the responsiveness of universities to the demands of industry. This means that the chartered universities are experiencing a push towards more professional skills and knowledge in the curriculum, and this may make them more similar to the former polytechnics. Finally the recent developments of a credit transfer and accumulation system may demand more uniformity among all Higher Education institutions.