



Diversity and Co-operation in Higher Education

••• a contribution to the debate

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Diversity and Co-operation in Higher Education

1. Introduction

The diversity of higher education in the United Kingdom is one of its strengths. It reflects the ability of a range of institutions to focus on what they do best, to meet a wide range of different customer requirements and to respond flexibly to changing needs.

Many institutions and departments are excellent at research and aim to build on or enhance their international, national or local reputations. Some institutions focus on widening participation and have large numbers of students from non-traditional backgrounds, including ethnic minorities and mature students. Most have for years worked closely with their local communities and businesses. Each institution aspires to be recognised for the quality of its teaching and learning and aims to encourage the development of scholarship in its staff.

The pattern of choice serves various international, national, regional and local clients and communities. The absence of the more formal stratification found in some countries preserves the potential for continuous evolution and innovation. The various aims are not mutually exclusive; they can be combined within one institution. To talk about research intensive and non-research intensive institutions is to misunderstand the diversity that exists and the evolving spectrum that is UK higher education.

Employers value genuine diversity that is built on high quality provision. They are likely to recruit from a range of institutions, seeking specialists from some, managers and management development from others and recruiting for general positions from across the wide range available. They also invest in a variety of institutions – and not necessarily in those awarded the highest scores in the Research Assessment Exercise. But they also look for joined-up approaches, for their staff to be able to access and accumulate knowledge from a variety of institutions, for institutions to be efficient in their use of resources and to share and evolve good practice. If businesses are to meet the full overheads on research and consultancy (as they should), then they will want to see that efficiency and effectiveness are optimised. Diversity must not equate to fragmentation.

The Government rightly exhorts institutions to focus on what they do best. But it also wants them to engage in other activities. This dilemma can be resolved through partnerships where each still plays to its strengths, but where the partnership taken as a whole achieves all the aims sought both by Government, the region and other stakeholders. However, developing partnerships involves costs and staff resources. If there are not synergistic benefits, the efforts are not worth the costs. Neither are partnerships panaceas.

This note offers suggestions to the Government, Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and institutions of Higher and Further Education on how partnerships might improve both the effectiveness and efficiency of what is available, while preserving (and even enhancing) diversity and customer choice.

2. Diversity as a Principle

Diversity can operate at the level of the system (through California-style strata of institutions where each knows its role), at the level of the institution or within institutions. The second could require a common culture and could run the risk of inhibiting innovation and flexibility if homogeneity becomes an end in its own right.

This paper suggests that diversity at the system level can best be secured through co-operation between institutions that encourages internal diversity. Co-operation between institutions and departments helps prevent diversity becoming costly fragmentation and instead supports improvements in efficiency and effectiveness so that the needs of diverse customers, clients and partners can be better met.

3. A Hypothetical Example

Let us assume a large urban conurbation with three universities. One is a leading research institution with an international reputation; it engages in technology transfer, notably through start-up and spin-out businesses and licensing; another institution has pockets of very good research but has a particular focus on more applied research and engaging closely with local businesses through a variety of business support and professional development programmes; the third has some good research in the newer creative industries, a reputation for widening participation and for providing excellent vocational courses.

Each institution decides to maintain and develop its business focus. Together the three offer an overlapping spectrum of provision that meets the national and regional requirements for excellence in research, teaching, knowledge transfer and widening participation.

There is a Higher Education College that offers more specialist provision. Several Further Education Colleges offer complementary higher education provision notably through HNC/Ds, Foundation Degrees, NVQ 4 and non-prescribed courses leading to professional and other work related qualifications. Some courses are franchised and some directly funded by HEFCE through a consortia approach. Students progress from the Further Education Colleges to the Universities, but very rarely to the research focused institution.

Acting in isolation, these institutions do not optimise their strengths; they do not maximise the quality of the student experience or their potential benefits to the national and regional economies:

- Some excellent courses, facilities and lecturers in each institution are not accessible to students in other institutions; they exist alongside lower quality provision; the overall quality of the system is thus sub-optimised;
- All institutions are struggling to deliver quality learning in such subjects as languages, built environment and engineering; but there are no formal frameworks or mechanisms to encourage dialogue across the institutions at all levels, no central funding to address the issues and no measurement or reward system to motivate staff;
- Because each institution addresses its markets largely in isolation, some opportunities - especially small company learning needs - are not met

because information is not pooled, necessary economies of scale are not secured and the market opportunities are not thought worth addressing;

- Each institution has its own payroll, personnel, estates, careers information and guidance services and a range of other administrative functions; there is some sharing of library, IT and procurement but the full potential for pooling resources, achieving economies of scale, raising quality through specialisation and releasing funds for the core function of teaching is not achieved;
- There is no unified marketing approach; rather each institution appears to be competing for students and for doing business with a range of companies in the public, private and not-for-profit sectors; this is confusing to those businesses who would prefer a central and more realistic source of information on what is available; the same fragmented approach applies to accessing knowledge on research, testing facilities and consultancy; the absence of a comprehensive and unified framework for credits and qualifications limits individual progression, workforce development and the realisation of the productive potential of the area;
- There is a hierarchical feel about the system; in particular students from non-traditional backgrounds entering the post- 92 institution can feel less valued than those in the research led institution – some feel in a ghetto; there is no student mobility around the system; employers tend to rely on the status of the latter rather than appreciate the skills and motivation of those in the former; the apparent stratification reinforces their prejudices;
- Because students are confined to a single institution, the opportunities for evolving a range of new (including multidisciplinary) courses through pooling and sharing provision are not maximised.
- At a time when the notions of intelligent regions and clusters of innovation are increasingly to the fore, the learning and innovative potential of the locality is not fully realised because the linkages and networks that are the key to realising such notions are not maximised.

4. How Might this System Evolve?

All institutions in the conurbation agree that they have strengths, distinct missions and brands that should be respected. Hence a "confederacy" approach of equals operating under a strategic framework is viewed as the best way forward ⁽¹⁾. This encourages local initiatives where bottom-up partnerships can be owned and developed within a top-down framework. The framework gives the seal of approval to the range of initiatives and relationships that evolve. The senior management team can also initiate studies under the framework umbrella where individuals are (perhaps understandably) reluctant to consider alternatives to how things currently operate.

⁽¹⁾ A "confederacy" model is one where organizations mutually agree to co-ordinate and combine some of their functions and services. Individual identities are preserved but economies achieved, the range of products increased and quality improved as resources are pooled and focused on developing the best the partners bring to the group.

Each of the issues identified above is tackled:

- Sub-optimal courses and those of a low quality are increasingly closed; students are then recruited and where necessary transferred to higher quality courses; associated adjustment costs are paid for on the basis of the 2/3 year pay back from such rationalisation; where it is still not economic to run certain courses such as languages, the federation contracts with the Open University as a "backbone network" to supply such provision – its credits being fully recognised;
- The best facilities or new facilities are developed with funding partly from the relevant Funding Council and RDA; as a result of focusing on and developing excellence, the region establishes world class centres for languages, built environment and system engineering; the private sector increasingly then uses such facilities and they attract new businesses to cluster around them; the centres attract students from outside the region (including from overseas) and the region benefits accordingly;
- Pooling market intelligence and undertaking new joint surveys establishes untapped customer demand for various courses from a wide catchment area; in particular the needs of various small company sectors are better understood and start to be addressed; new courses are developed and delivered that benefit from the economies of scale now available; the market for lifelong learning is increased to the benefit of all the players; once available to the confederacy, these courses are more widely marketed and the market is increased still further;
- Some administrative functions such as payroll, personnel and estates are pooled and taken into a "holding company" that serves the needs of all the members of the confederacy; the existing procurement consortium is expanded so that both higher and further education institutions are members; as a result not only are systems rationalized and costs saved but quality is also raised – partly through attracting higher quality administrative staff; information and good practice are better shared partly because the functions are now brought together – this is especially useful in the area of internal audit that can now perform a more positive and respected role; the purchasing power of the confederacy is greater than before - again securing benefits for all; joint performance management systems are also introduced and these help the confederacy focus on and reward progress on common aims;
- A unified marketing approach is adopted for the local market; the simple message is conveyed to all potential customers that no matter what an individual learner or organisation needs, the confederacy has the capacity to deliver it; where necessary to overcome different terms and conditions between HE and FE institutions, staff are seconded to a separate trading company that sets its own unified terms and conditions; as part of a more unified and customer focused approach, credit accumulation and transfer arrangements are agreed based on those in the FE sector; the potential of FE Colleges as local and accessible community centres of learning is better realised;

- An easier and more unified and professional point of access to all the members of the confederacy is established; this interface unit covers R & D, knowledge transfer, consultancy/business problem solving, as well as course options for mature learners and organisations;
- Staff and students move around the system and the old notions of hierarchy are broken down; students from the post-92 and specialist HE institution and from FE Colleges attend courses and lectures at the other institutions and students from the research focused institution benefit from some of the excellent inspirational lecturers in the post-92 institution; the individual student Progress Files show in their Academic Transcripts that courses have been attended at more than one institution (even though a joint degree is not awarded);
- Thus, a central aim of the Government of encouraging and facilitating widening participation and progression is also achieved; students from non-traditional backgrounds are eased into a system that then allows progression; the institution they enter is sympathetic and experienced in supporting such students but the individual is not constrained by what that particular institution can offer;
- New and innovative courses are developed; these include combining modules from the specialist institution with vocational and more traditional academic courses from the other institutions; again the local market for learning is grown while the conurbation increases its appeal to mobile students from elsewhere – including from overseas; greater use is made of all the facilities in the evening and weekends as demand from mature learners is better met.

These changes are not just theoretical. Much is happening and has been for many years. But only now are some of the actions being seen as part of a more strategic repositioning of institutions in response to global and regional pressures and funding opportunities.

5. Some Current Actions

“There has always been a spirit of scholarly co-operation across higher education. Global research consortia, the sharing of knowledge and co-operation at the level of individual disciplines and the notion of knowledge as a shared free good available to all are integral to the culture of higher education.” (Cooperation and Collaboration: some private sector experience; CIHE June 2001)

- Rationalisation in the provision of chemistry education in the North West of England was agreed by institutions with encouragement from the RDA. There was a danger that each institution acting in isolation could have taken decisions that while appearing to be in their individual interests might have weakened the long term capability of the region. As a result of the facilitating and funding role of the RDA and following close consultation between the institutions:
 - a world class research chemistry department is being developed at the new combined universities of Manchester/UMIST;
 - teaching provision from some of the other institutions has been focused in Manchester Metropolitan University;

- Building excellence from pooling complementary capabilities is underway in a number of conurbations:
 - Bristol and Bath Universities and UWE are considering working closer together on research where their combined RAE scores would create the highest concentration of expertise outside the South East triangle;
 - there are proposals for close co-ordination between the medical schools at many pre-92 universities, the applied medical research at post-92 institutions and the teaching capabilities in both;
 - world class business schools will evolve as neighbouring institutions increasingly encourage their management, accountancy and other relevant centres of expertise to work together; complementary capabilities in law also offer possibilities for extending expertise as institutions work closer together;

- The need for rationalisation in the provision of languages, built environment and engineering has been recognised in London and elsewhere for some time;
 - HEIs are distinguishing between languages as a main subject, languages as a secondary subject and courses such as historic literature. It may well be that a couple of major centres plus on-line delivery could satisfy the needs of those studying languages as a second subject. On the third area and to safeguard research it may be that specialist research institutes (such as those at the University of London) could play a more significant role than currently.

 - Bilateral discussions are underway across London to safeguard the provision of built environment courses where demand has reduced (except for architecture).

 - A major review of engineering in London was completed some two years ago following the transfer of civil engineering from Westminster to Southwark. Some progress has been made in amalgamating departments.

 - The dialogue on how to ensure adequate provision of quality learning in the sciences and engineering has to continue in all regions. Customers' needs cannot be safeguarded either if the provision of various subjects is lost or if it is continued with sub-standard facilities.

- Pooling market information and securing economies of scale in the development and delivery of learning to small companies has enabled:
 - Middlesex University Higher and Further Education Learning Partnership has grown the market for learning particularly through tackling the small company market for learning in a more cost-effective way. (This partnership embraces all the FE colleges in North London. It grew from a confederacy between the University of Middlesex and the neighbouring FE colleges of Barnett, Harlow, Waltham Forest and The College of North East London).

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 - The Staffordshire University Regional Federation (SURF) is another "HEFCE Recognised Funding Consortium" with 11 FE colleges in Staffordshire and Shropshire and Staffordshire University as the lead institution. A major growth plan over the next three years involves the

expansion of Foundation Degrees to cover all curriculum areas where market demand has been identified, and the establishing of HE centres in all the colleges.

- There has so far been slow progress in achieving economies of scale and raising quality through pooling the administrative functions of institutions. However, some HE institutions in London are installing joint IT systems that offer economies of scale and greater features than each could afford if they acted independently.
- Unified marketing messages are a feature of various partnerships such as those in North London and Staffordshire noted above. The Derby Regional Network between the University of Derby and the FE Colleges of High Peak, Burton, Mackworth, Derby Tertiary College Wilmorton and South East Derbyshire adopted a credit framework based on the FE model. This particularly assisted the assembly of flexible learning packages to meet the needs of businesses as well as learners. It can overcome the difficulties that small companies encounter in trying to meet the requirements of NVQs by providing units appropriate to their own work setting.
- In Massachusetts USA, Five Colleges Incorporated (a partnership between the State University of Massachusetts at Amherst and the liberal arts colleges at Hampshire, Mount Holyoke, Smith and Amherst) promote and administer long-term forms of co-operation including the shared use of and investment in educational and cultural facilities, collaboration among the faculty, staff and students, joint curriculum development and expanded cultural opportunities. It enables students to be based at one institution and study a range of courses at other institutions. Students can ask for new courses to be created from the wide range available (provided some other students also want to participate). They have access to the pooled library resources of the partnership (the pooling arrangement itself saving resources and enabling a wider range to be available to all students). A Board of Directors consists of the Presidents (VCs) of the institutions (including the State system) and an executive director of the consortium. (see <http://www.fivecolleges.edu>)
- There are many examples of more comprehensive learning being offered through combining resources:
 - Combined Universities in Cornwall aims to provide a large increase in HE in Cornwall thus boosting economic prosperity. The £96 million development on a hub and rim arrangement is a comprehensive partnership of all HE and FE providers who have signed up to a joint constitution. The project is supported by the European Union, the South West RDA, the County Council and HEFCE. It has in place academic planning and economic development groups that ensure that all academic and business development activities are complementary and that articulation procedures between FE and HE courses and programmes are being developed.
 - The University of the Highlands and Islands and that in Cumbria are further examples of coordinating and developing learning from a range of institutions using e-learning in particular.

- The creation of a new school of nursing in Glasgow between the University of Glasgow and Glasgow Caledonian University shows that very old and not so old institutions can work closely together – in this case to strengthen nursing education and research (Glasgow and Strathclyde Universities have for years worked on joint research projects and increasingly on knowledge transfer and teaching.)
- In Wales, the alliance between Cardiff University and the University of Wales College of Medicine is but one of a series of realignments and rationalizations driven by Welsh Ministers and the Funding Council. (Across the UK there have been over 27 mergers involving HE institutions since 1994. Federations also exist notably at Anglia and Surrey.)
- The establishment of a new campus in the Medway offers a good example of how a range of HE institutions and FE colleges can pool their offerings to create high quality provision. The “multiversity” involves the University of Kent at Canterbury, the University of Greenwich and the Mid Kent College of Further and Higher Education; Canterbury Christ Church University College and Kent Institute of Art and Design are also involved. A portfolio of courses draws on the specialisms of each institution and provides progressions routes from sub-degree, through undergraduate to post-graduate and continuing professional development. Hence provision in Business Studies, Tourism Management, Law, IT and Computing, Social and Healthcare Studies, Chemical and Life Sciences and Civil Engineering as well as combined studies are all being located at the new campus. Addressing the local skills deficit, supporting economic regeneration of the Thames Gateway area and encouraging adult learners as well as learning progression, are all aims of the initiative;
- Anglia Polytechnic University has established five regional faculties and a single regional academic council (like a traditional Senate) to oversee courses on its campuses and at 22 partner colleges. This approach promotes a common curriculum and standards and a sense of collegiality;
- Newcastle, Northumberland and Sunderland Universities have joined with local colleges for a range of degrees and in the south-west, Plymouth and Bournemouth have similar arrangements; the development of Foundation Degrees is both a spur and will encourage further alliances.

6. Some Constraints

It is not the purpose of this paper to focus on the difficulties. Some of these have been noted in other CIHE publications on this theme ⁽²⁾. However, it is important for institutions to consider:

- Whether the organisation and governance structure is conducive to facilitating or inhibiting change and how it may need to be massaged;
- Whether there is a similar culture between the institutions;
- Whether there is a common academic framework (essential if credits are to be portable);
- Clarity about who ultimately makes the awards;
- The need for an at least temporary resource reservoir to deal with the adjustment processes and a realisation that there will be costs both in handling the transition and in running the system – though the savings from pooling administrative functions have been put at around 5% of total costs;
- The need to minimise the travel by students between institutions perhaps through greater use of technology links.

7. Some Lessons Learned

Partnerships should emerge progressively and be built on developing relationships; they should not be forced.

They need to identify mutual benefits and advantages that are realistically achievable within a set timescale.

Ownership of the rationale for strategic partnerships from the Governing Councils/Boards of the institutions is needed early on in the negotiations. They will want to consider such issues as the underlying rationale, whether there is likely to be a clash or complementarity of cultures, the opportunities and risks (including the risks from maintaining the *status quo*), possible alternatives and exit strategies and how the balance between confidentiality and communication is handled - especially in the early stages.

There must be absolute clarity of vision on the mission of the institution and the role partnerships can play in achieving that. There must also be a clear mission for the partnership and accompanying strategies showing how it will add value to all of the partners. An accompanying business plan must be professional, comprehensive, have hard financial information and clear milestones.

The goals must be worth going for; if they are, the senior management teams will want to devote substantial effort to encouraging their realisation. They will want to try and secure a commonality of view on the way forward that is shared within and across the institutions concerned. That does not imply shelving the tough decisions

⁽²⁾ Especially *Cooperation and Collaboration: some private sector experience* June 2001

(including on key people); they have to be faced early on even if some are implemented later.

That commitment needs to be communicated from the Governing Councils/Boards and the senior management teams throughout the organizations. It should be reinforced by other members in the project teams. There can never be too much communication of the rationale behind the discussions. Vested interests need to be identified and involved as far as possible - but not if that undermines the responsibilities of the Boards and senior executive team to take decisions that are in the long-term interests of the institution; there will be losers as well as winners. (But the losers must not be able to scupper a deal that has wide support. Arranging for people to exit with dignity will need to be planned.) Regular meetings of senior staff (with no substitutes), businesslike agendas and with project teams that are led by one of the executives all show and help embed high-level commitment. A performance management system can be one way of motivating all the participants to achieve the changes needed.

While clear leadership is important, devolving ownership and responsibility to the appropriate operational level is likely to help secure that wider ownership. It is at that level that the plans will be realised or not. The timing of devolving responsibility and how the balance is struck between continuing high-level ownership and local involvement is something that requires careful thought. However, an early sense that the partnership is led by its members acting in concert helps sustain commitment.

The allocation of responsibilities for specific areas of work to each of the partners helps secure their wide involvement. The equal or proportionate sharing of costs and administration helps reveal and secure ownership across the partners.

Agendas that encourage the sharing of experiences encourage a dynamic and learning partnership.

For larger strategic partnerships it may be necessary to choose a few realistically achievable priorities and early wins that are compatible with the wider vision. Resources might be focused under the 80/20 rule to address the critical success factors (perhaps six to ten high impact projects) and achieve some early demonstrable results.

Equally, it is not possible to provide a totally integrated framework or to make progress on all fronts at the same time or speed. The process of developing a partnership is messy and a pragmatic step-by-step approach will be inevitable. But the overall vision must not be lost sight of; imagining the future and then working backwards can be a pragmatic approach.

The process of co-operating is costly not least in terms of staff resources. Many partnerships underestimate the costs involved, especially the time of key people. If there are no tangible synergistic benefits then the efforts may not be worth making. The Government has a particular financial role in helping to lubricate the process of change where the up-front rationalisation costs exceed the short-term financial benefits.

Finally, partnerships are not a panacea. If they aim to hide underlying weaknesses, then maybe these weaknesses should be tackled first. Neither should partnerships aim to reduce customer choice. Collusion will not serve the long-term interests of the institutions or the sector at large.

8. Conclusion

Partnerships can help each higher and further education institution in the United Kingdom focus on what they do best. They can ensure diversity at the system level while encouraging diversity within institutions. They can help achieve the aims of widening participation. They can raise the overall effectiveness and efficiency of the system.

However, they will need to be driven by:

- consensus within an overall vision set by the institutions concerned rather than from outside;
- the search for enhanced quality (including the quality of the student experience) and clear ideas as to how the partnership will be greater than the sum of the parts; partnerships without clear achievable aims can be costly and wasteful;

Partnerships and particularly the federation approach suggested in this paper can help each institution better relate to national, regional and local aims and better serve the needs of its customers, clients and partners.

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