CHAPTER 10

The Student Experience in the UK and US
Two Converging Pictures of Decline?

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Introduction

In the US, in just the three years from 2010 to 2012, there were the following publications: Higher Education?: How Colleges Are Wasting Our Money and Failing Our Kids – And What We Can Do About It (Hacker and Dreifus 2010); Arum and Roksa’s Academically Adrift (2011); College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be (Delbanco 2012); as well as Keeling and Hersh’s We’re Losing Our Minds: Rethinking American Higher Education (2012a). All four books make similar, damning assertions about the declining quality of the student experience. In the words of Arum and Roksa: “There are ample reasons to worry about the state of undergraduate learning in higher education,” “many contemporary college academic programs are not particularly rigorous or demanding,” and “they might graduate, but they are failing to develop the higher-order cognitive skills that it is widely assumed college students should master” (2011, 2; 31; 121).

In the UK, there is a well-known dictum, “What happens in the US today happens in the UK tomorrow.” This chapter will explore the dual questions: are the higher education systems of the US and the UK converging, and is there a resulting decline in the quality of the student experience?

But, before considering any suggestion that the two higher educational systems, or “models,” of the two countries are, or have been, converging, it must surely be first acknowledged that, as pointed out by Hersh and Merrow: “American higher education consists of about 3400 institutions, but it will never be confused with a ‘system.’ Higher education in this country [US], unlike in Europe, for example is not one unified entity” (2004, 1). While, in comparison, it may be true that the UK has had a “unified” system, it should also be pointed out that there is still a fair amount of diversity between the various universities and colleges that go to make up that system, even within England. And there are also increasing differences between the four home countries1

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1 Devolution in the UK followed referenda in Wales and Scotland in 1997, and, with differing legislative powers, the Scottish Parliament, National Assembly for Wales, and Northern Ireland Assembly were established in 1998. Higher education policy is devolved.
which make up the UK, especially in Scotland, and with regard to funding – to the extent that Alan Trench (senior research fellow in the Constitution Unit at University College London) argued in the *Times Higher Education (THE)*, in 2012, that, “For all the talk about ‘British’ higher education, this now survives in name more than substance. The UK has four, increasingly distinct higher education systems, not one with modest variations.” Any consideration of higher education in the US and the UK can, therefore, only at best deal in generalizations.

Over the period in question, it should also be noted that there has arguably been a growing confusion as to the function of universities and what a higher education is for, (see e.g. Barnett 1990; Collini 2012) with purposes ranging across: social engineering tool; employment filter; transition from school to work; career change; genuine knowledge creation; gate-keeper to the academy; and skill provider to many professions. There is no one thing that *is* higher education or a university. Somehow all these things and more, to varying degrees in different institutions, are being forced to sit quite uncomfortably together.

**The Case that There is (Some) Convergence**

However, despite the preceding caveats, there would appear to be a case that over the last fifty years, there have nevertheless been changes in the UK, which have arguably made the UK system increasingly similar, in a number of ways, to many aspects common to higher education in the US.

The first of these changes were those resulting from “massification” and the rapid expansion of higher education since the mid-sixties. The participation rate of 18–30 year-olds going to university in the UK has grown from under 7% to 40%, but there was not a concomitant increase in university funding, which meant that the net effect was a huge reduction of funding per student over the 25 years between 1976 and 2001. There was a 20% reduction between 1976 and 1989 and then a 38% reduction between 1989 and 2001 (HEPI 2006).

In addition, during the fifty years in question, in 1992, polytechnic institutions became universities (allowed by the Further and Higher Education Act 1992). Primarily teaching institutions, this change effectively supported the reduction in the unit of resource, as they had always been less well funded than universities. Becoming universities also brought a pressure for those institutions to undertake more research, bringing with it what many saw as a “distorting emphasis on ‘research productivity’” (Collini 2011, 12) and creating