

Scotch Quality: The Distinctiveness of Scottish Higher Education

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Abstract

Since the establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, the distinctiveness of Scotland's higher education system within the United Kingdom and internationally has increased. Scotland has carved out a space in higher education that reflects its distinct political culture. Aspects of this distinctiveness revolve around Scottish conceptions of the public good and policy making defaulted to finding collaborative solutions to local, national, and global problems.

Legislative responsibility for education in Scotland lies wholly with the Scottish parliament, and there have long been differences between higher education in Scotland and in the rest of the United Kingdom. A recent study by the authors ("A Strategic Analysis of the Scottish Higher Education Sector's Distinctive Assets," British Council, 2021) proposes that these differences can be characterized as constituting a series of distinctive assets. These assets are not just about excellence; additionally, and uniquely, they set the Scottish higher education sector apart from its main comparators. This article explores these assets and considers some growing challenges.

Education as a National Public Good

Societal benefit—the public good—is routinely prioritized over private gain in policy making. This is a fundamental aspect of Scottish higher education. The propensity in Scotland to legislate for the collective good has many manifestations in higher education: resistance to tuition fees for Scottish (and, until Brexit, EU) students; a whole-sector approach to widening participation from underrepresented communities; the facilitation of transfer to universities from colleges; targeted university access programs; community outreach; and the recognition of prior learning, including in the workplace. Each Scottish university annually updates an "Outcomes Agreement" with the government that includes targets for widening participation.

The modest size of the Scottish sector means that representatives from all 19 universities can and do meet together. This facilitates the collectivist ethos and unity of purpose.

A remarkable aspect of Scottish higher education lies in its relationship to the Scottish government. What is distinctive, certainly within the UK context, is an acceptance that the mandates of the two entities should have a great deal of overlap and that universities can and should deliver governmental priorities. While this is not unheard of elsewhere in the world, in most such places universities operate as agencies of the state, without autonomy from government. In Scotland, the coincidence of interests is (more or less) freely given.

Enhancing the Student Experience

There is a whole-sector approach to improving learning outcomes, student well-being, and student experience. Student benefit is placed at the centre of quality assurance considerations at all stages in the university journey, from initial contact to alumni. Central to this approach are "Enhancement Themes" delivered sector-wide by the Scottish branch of the UK Quality Assurance Agency, in partnership with universities and with staff and students as stakeholders. Initiatives that derive from the Enhancement Themes include addressing the support needs of research students; improving the experiences of distance learning students; and enhancing graduate employability.

Enhancing graduate employability is embedded in degree programs at Scottish universities. Collaboration between the higher education sector and employers means that 95 percent of Scottish students are in employment or training within six months of graduation. Students are able to access work placements, take on industry-led projects, and undertake support programs from their university to assist them in developing start-up companies. The latter have contributed to Scottish business success, for example, growing new digital technology companies in the Dundee–Edinburgh–Glasgow hub. International students are involved and have stayed to become local entrepreneurs.

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Positive Interplay of International and Domestic Activities

Scottish universities have a long tradition of international collaboration: Four are over 400 years old. The past 10 years have seen a rapid increase in internationalization activities across all Scottish universities. On a per capita basis, Scotland is second only to Australia for international student enrollments. It has four universities ranked in the top 200 globally and seven in the top 400—second only to Switzerland, per capita. Some 36 percent of academic and research staff in Scottish universities are international and this proportion has increased significantly in the past five years.

Scottish successes in internationalization are one consequence of the joined-up approach between universities and government. An international dimension to the public-good ethos is provided through the Scottish government's commitment to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and these inform policy decisions relating to higher education. National and international activities interrelate dynamically: The national funding of research and teaching contributes to the infrastructure that enables Scottish universities to compete and succeed globally. International engagement benefits wider Scottish society through research innovation, quality enhancement of programs, building business links, cultural enrichment, employment growth, and revenue. Universities take advantage of the reputation of the United Kingdom as a quality international study destination, while at the same time offering a Scottish differentiation.

World-Class Research that Delivers Local Benefits

Scotland's research output is highly dependent on its universities. Its distinctiveness lies in the juxtaposition of excellence with a coordinated, sector-wide national research strategy. Success is apparent from the impressive international indicators of Scottish research impact, including publications per researcher; share of publications with international collaborators (more than half); and citations per researcher. On a per capita basis, Scotland outperforms the rest of the United Kingdom and most other countries on these indicators. The outward-facing orientation of Scottish research places it among the global leaders across many disciplines, including veterinary and medical sciences; earth, environmental and marine sciences; economics; archaeology; and philosophy. Scottish universities have been notably successful in the competition for both UK national research funds and the European Union's Horizon 2020 fund.

Recent investment in industry-led interdisciplinary "Innovation Centres" illustrates how Scottish political culture informs policy making. Their areas of focus range from climate change to aquaculture, and funding is tied to solving global problems, enhancing national economic performance, and supporting local communities. These centers manifest a complex balancing of public and private interests, as well as an attempt to accord equal weight to regional development, the national public good, and commercial imperatives.

Challenges Ahead

University finances are under extreme pressure. Scottish government funding has been declining in real terms over the past five years and Scottish institutions now receive less public funding per student than elsewhere in the United Kingdom. This has resulted in an expansion of enrollments of fee-paying students (mainly international) to cover shortfalls. This leads to greater vulnerability to both the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although pro-EU sentiment remains strong in Scotland, Scottish universities will suffer the same consequences from Brexit as those felt elsewhere in the United Kingdom. These include a decline in EU student enrollments, a reduction in student exchanges after withdrawal from the Erasmus program, fewer EU researchers and academic staff, and great uncertainty over research funding.

The full impact of the pandemic on HE delivery has yet to evolve but one, over the last year, is the significant decline in international student mobility, with lower new enrollments and associated revenue losses for universities. It has also greatly reduced the mobility of researchers and academics. But, on a more positive note, it has unleashed a torrent of energy, with universities demonstrating imagination and innovation in pedagogy, assessments, and student support. Additionally, the Scottish government provided emergency funding for research, and universities played a crucial role in vaccine and testing research and in communicating knowledge to the public. ▲

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