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Universities and Regions: the 'Hinterland' Issue in European Higher Education Policymaking

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Abstract

The article addresses the issues surrounding the importance of regions in the construction of European higher education systems and, in particular, the impact of 'hinterlands' in the formation of policy. It draws on studies of Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Norway, Portugal and the United Kingdom to illustrate different policy approaches and shows how in some countries 'hinterland' issues have been the major factor in the reconstruction of national higher education systems. It draws a distinction between the past where policies were essentially based on the growth of student numbers to the present where the drivers are much more related to regional social and economic factors and, in some countries, to public good policies on equalising opportunities between deprived and affluent areas. It suggests that regional issues are now central to how systems are constructed and that as a result systems will become more complex to manage but that regional and institutional 'bottom up' determination

may offer better prospects for innovation and flexibility in the face of societal change.

Keywords: Regions, Hinterlands, Governance

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Introduction

It is a characteristic of writing and theorising about the governance of European higher education that scholars draw their conclusions from ‘top down’ studies of national systems based on state level structural reforms (De Boer *et al* 2009, Paradeise *et al* 2009, Bleike *et al* 2017, Kruger *et al* 2018, Carnoy *et al* 2018). This approach, while valuable in isolating and comparing national reforms in governance structures and their systemic impact on institutions, does not always address in detail the underlying composition of national systems and how this provides a ‘bottom up’ driver which can shape the systems and affect the policy outcomes. We have had the opportunity, thanks to support from the Oxford Centre for Global Higher Education (CGHE) (funded by ESRC and Research England) to study governance in higher education from both national and institutional perspectives and what strikes us is the extent to which institutional and national development sagas are affected by their locality and region, by geophysical characteristics and by the way institutions interrelate with the historic economic conditions of where they are located. There is a strong tendency to assess higher education systems either via institutional rankings or through a variety of externally generated metrics. This provides only a simplified view. A ‘bottom up’ approach offers a more nuanced and realistic, if more complex, picture.

One example of how policy can be affected by regional considerations can be found in what we have called the ‘hinterland’ issue. This is where governments seek to extend their higher education systems beyond traditional higher education centres or main centres of population into new, often rural, areas. In considering the issue, we follow the *OED* definition of ‘hinterlands’ as being areas lying behind coastal towns and cities and, more broadly, ‘back countries’; in political or social terms the ‘hinterland’ can sometimes be described as a ‘left behind’ area. Our research suggests that addressing ‘hinterland’ issues can have a dominating effect on higher education policymaking—in some countries, such as Norway and Portugal, it can have a transforming impact on the totality of the national system. This reinforces the need to take account of the impact of regions on the shape and the dynamic of national systems and on institutional structures and on institutional missions.

Our research draws on detailed studies of higher education systems in Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Norway, Portugal and the UK, countries selected for their broad representation of the European scene. It included interviews with policymakers and extended interviews with 27 universities selected on a differentiated basis within each system and using a common template, 220 interviews in all. (Shattock and Horvath 2019, Shattock, Horvath and Enders 2023 and Shattock and Horvath 2023). In addition, special studies of Ireland and Germany were prepared by Ellen Hazelkorn and Jurgen Enders respectively.

The following general research themes emerged:

- The repeated evidence, though not always acknowledged as such, of the influence of locality and region on the development of higher education systems. This expressed itself in different ways in different systems through the twin pressures of massification and the economic role of institutions, particularly in areas of economic disparity ; this forces 'hinterland' issues to become system issues.
- The distorting effect of a historic concentration of universities in major, often coastal, cities in main population centres. Such institutions, by the nature of their history and their inherited autonomy, can suck resources and students away from the 'hinterland' and offer institutional models that cannot easily be replicated in less affluent and more sparsely populated rural and semi rural areas. A consequence is that 'hinterland' based issues can come to dominate national higher education agendas and generate unwelcome levels of state intervention and layers of bureaucratic oversight which cramp the freedoms and autonomy of the traditional elite institutions when applied on a system basis.
- A lack of academic and reputational parity between institutions located in 'hinterland' regions and long established universities located in affluent cities raises policy concerns about the equity and effectiveness of creating, in practice or by design, first tier, second tier and even third tiers of institutions within single systems. This throws up policy questions around pressures for comparability of status, apparent funding

differentiations, research mission and the effects of student choice on institutional viability and on local and regional economies.

- The role of higher education and the distribution of institutions is becoming inextricably linked to wider national issues relating to disparities in economic, social and cultural performance between 'hinterland' regions and urban centres. This leads to questions relating to the role of higher education in 'levelling up' and cross linkages with national policies on the location of industry, hospital provision and cultural investment.

These themes are illustrated in the countries studied. It is not suggested that these six case studies are fully representative of the whole of Europe but in selecting countries on the basis of their system characteristics –northern European, central European, southern European and the Anglophone—an attempt has been made to reflect a broad picture of European higher education systems. Five of the six countries may be said to have 'hinterlands' where higher education provision has historically been sketchy and underfunded, if it has had any at all, while the sixth, Germany, has a long established and well defined regionally based system. This has enabled Germany to avoid 'hinterland' issues as such but has not eliminated the problems surrounding institutional status which has been such a policy driver in the other countries where a common feature has been the emergence of two or more institutional tiers and their need to reconcile them within a common system. In some they have been governed by explicit binary lines while in others they represent simply a differentiation between older and newer generations of institutions or between 'classical' and 'modern' institutions with more applied missions

Norway

Historically Norway has had a higher education system which has balanced three large historic research universities located in coastal cities (Oslo, Bergen and Trondheim) with a multitude of smaller teaching institutions offering mostly bachelor degrees and professional programmes in regionally important fields. Its higher education system thus mirrored the country's geography in siting its universities in its more affluent cities while what may be termed its 'hinterland'

provision was restricted to a profusion of lower status colleges. In a first step into a regional policy the government established Tromsø University in the far North in the early 1970s explicitly to seek to reduce student migration to the South. Tromsø was planned to be comparable to the existing universities in terms of research intensity but with a much greater regional persona and regionally applied programme.

Thirty years later both main political parties took up the need, on basic democratic grounds, to equalise the provision of opportunity between 'hinterland' and historically affluent areas. Equality of opportunities in higher education between 'hinterland' and traditional centres has become a key principle in Norwegian politics. It reflects 'the idea that higher education is part of the society, that it frames it sort of, sounds very fluffy and beautiful in a way but in a way it's part of the Nordic welfare state' (policy researcher, quoted in Shattock, Horvath and Enders 2023 p 64). In 2003 Parliament approved the Quality Reform legislation which on the one hand authorised a programme of mergers of the regionally based institutions and on the other established a new organisation, the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) to supervise the mergers, take responsibility for quality assurance and for recommending the upgrading of merged colleges to university status. The recognition of research as an integral element in university status has been preserved and NOKUT's approval of the academic strength of four doctoral and five master's programmes is required before university status can be conferred. This legislation has driven institutional change and the development of higher education in the whole system, including in the four established universities. The creation of the new universities has led to inter and intra institutional diversity within and across regions with some college mergers involving up to five or six institutions; the creation of NOKUT has introduced a new centre of policymaking in Norwegian higher education.

Three distinctive features mark the progress of the reform. The first was that there was no attempt to found a single site new university on the Tromsø model with the size of the investment that this implied. Second, was that it was driven and protected by a supportive political culture and third that the decision-making on re structuring was highly consensual—colleges were invited to suggest their own merger partners and mergers were not imposed by the

Ministry or NOKUT. (When the Rectors' Conference objected to a Ministry proposal to cluster regional colleges into a limited number of large regional universities the Ministry withdrew it and substituted a scheme where financial incentives were offered to encourage voluntary institutionally-led mergers). The Ministry conducts biannual face to face reviews with institutions on their progress against strategic plans but these are not regarded as an imposition by the institutions as they might be elsewhere but simply as reflecting an accepted part of the disciplines of a Nordic welfare state. The process of restructuring has been long drawn out over two decades but has had a transformational impact on Norwegian higher education creating a system of 10 comprehensive universities, six specialist universities and 23 university colleges.

Portugal

As in Norway higher education in Portugal was historically concentrated in affluent coastal cities, in Lisbon (University of Lisbon, the Technical University of Lisbon), in Porto (the University of Porto) and in Coimbra (Coimbra University); 45% of the population are located in the Lisbon and Porto metropolitan areas. Under the Salazar regime higher education was restricted and elite but after 1974 widening participation and expansion, particularly in the rural areas became a key element of the post- Revolution reforms. This was driven by a pent up demand for higher education places and pressure from regional political sources and from colleges. This has resulted in the creation of nine more universities (including one each in the Azores and Madeira), a public university institute in Lisbon, an open university and 15 state run polytechnics, as well as a large private sector. The great majority of the new institutions have been founded in the country's 'hinterland' and have been strongly directed towards applied subject areas of local or regional importance, while at the same time adapting their academic programmes to the Bologna recommendations.

In particular respects developments in Portugal do not follow the Norwegian pattern. In the first the country operates a strict binary line between universities and polytechnics with some disciplines—medicine, law, pharmacy, the natural sciences, economics, psychology and veterinary science—restricted to universities while polytechnics are intended to be much more engaged in practical training. Polytechnics do not have the power to award doctoral

degrees although there is considerable upward pressure to reverse this and, legislation has recently been approved to upgrade their titles to Polytechnic Universities. A substantial differentiation exists between state funding for institutions in the two sectors. All this reflects a much less consensual approach to governance than is to be found in Norway and relations between institutions and ministerial bureaucracy are less cordial; a national accreditation agency operates in an altogether more directive way than NOKUT in Norway. As an external board member described it:

We as a public university are completely autonomous in financial terms, in scientific and pedagogical terms we are autonomous from the government. [But] of course we have to comply with all the rules and regulations (quoted in Shattock, Horvath and Enders 2023, p 42)

Both countries adhere to the principle that an essential criterion for university status is research activity. Norway regulates this by delegating to NOKUT the power to approve a given number of doctoral programmes in 'hinterland' institutions; Portugal adopts a different approach more geared to attracting external research funding through the creation of joint research campuses in designated fields involving, as appropriate, both universities and polytechnics, and intended to remedy a national weakness in research outside Lisbon and Porto. These campuses have been successful in attracting Horizon and other external funding but as engagement with external bodies has deepened there has been a tendency to loosen the bonds between researchers and the research campuses and their universities. This threatens to weaken university research cultures and institutional oversight. Thus an imaginative attempt to strengthen research performance is in danger of undermining an overriding Humboldtian commitment to the combination of teaching and research within each university institution.

Ireland*

Ireland has followed a not dissimilar path to Norway although the main drivers have been rather different. Like Norway and Portugal its geophysical character had originally favoured the establishment of a university system in the larger population centres especially Dublin (45% of the total population live in the

greater Dublin area) but historically a concentration of institutions in Dublin (Trinity College, Dublin (TCD), University College, Dublin (UCD), Dublin City University (DCU), the Royal College of Surgeons and the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT)) was mediated in the nineteenth century by the establishment of University College, Galway, and University College, Cork under the auspices of the National University of Ireland as non-denominational alternatives to the Church of England entry restrictions to TCD. In 1989 two national institutes of higher education in Dublin and Limerick (DCU and the University of Limerick) were upgraded to university status. Nevertheless this was a highly centralised system symbolised by the location of the National University of Ireland in Dublin and the creation of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in 1971 as a central steering and governance mechanism. Effectively the concentration of the university system mirrored the situation in Norway and Portugal. Regions were only of secondary importance.

However, in the late 1960s, the realisation grew that regional colleges were necessary to meet the economic imperative for technically qualified people. This led to the foundation of regional technical colleges (RTCs) to educate students primarily at craft and professional levels. These colleges were controlled by the Ministry and represented one side of a clearly demarcated binary line. In 1992, recognising the extent to which they had broadened their professional teaching contributions into new fields these RTC titles were upgraded to Institutes of Technology (IoTs) confirming their status as higher education institutions. In 2007 they were transferred from the control of the Ministry to the HEA where they acquired levels of autonomy comparable to the universities. Between 2020 and 2023 the long march to university status was completed by the creation of five Technological Universities through a series of mergers of the 14 IoTs. The government's stated aim was:

By creating institutions of scale and strength, multi campus technological universities will bring greater social and economic benefits to their regions through a strengthened role in research and innovation and the delivery of a broad range of high quality education and training in each of their campuses (Government of Ireland 2018, quoted in Shattock and Horvath 2023)

This could be said to have paralleled the regional college mergers undertaken in Norway in that, apart from DIT, they were multi campus and spread over wide geographical areas.

Thus the Irish system has seen a transformation of its higher education system with the existing number of public universities nearly doubled by the upgrading of 'hinterland' institutions (decisions on two IoTs remain to be settled). The former binary line has disappeared, and effectively did so from the transfer of the IoTs from the Ministry to the HEA, but the role of the new institutions remains uncertain in spite of the government statement above, and it is yet to become clear whether the formal binary line is to be replaced by a reputationally based informal divide as occurred in the immediate years of the UK's upgrading of its polytechnics.

Where the case of Ireland differs from Norway and Portugal is in the source of the drive for reform. Dublin remains the dominant force and the regions remain weak. The pursuit of equality between the IoT sector and the university system lay chiefly with the IoTs themselves (the DIT fought a high profile legal case for a change of title in 1996 and lost). It remains to be seen whether the new Technological Universities will slough off their non-degree technical and professional programmes as the UK polytechnics did or whether they will seek additional funding allocations to compete in research with the existing universities. Their status within the Irish system seems directly comparable to the title of universities of applied science adopted in some other European systems. In terms of the widening of higher education into engagement with regions the initiative appears very much at the moment to lie with the Technological Universities. The upgrading of the IoTs was much more a response to institutional ambitions and political pressure rather than to a regionally led programme to address 'hinterland' issues in new ways. Nevertheless the promotion of the IoTs to university status represents a step towards reinforcing a policy role for regions. The fact that the new institutions are multi campus gives them the potential to become significant regional actors.

Hungary

Compared to Norway, Portugal and Ireland Hungary is an outlier in addressing 'hinterland' issues. It has an extensive hinterland but does not prioritise 'hinterland' policies. Although more than 50% of the country's landmass is agricultural 33% of its population is located in the Budapest metropolitan area where economic, social and cultural activity is concentrated. As an example more than half (13) of the public comprehensive and specialist universities are sited in Budapest including Eotvos Lorand University (ELTE), formerly the University of Budapest, historically the elite, dominant Hungarian university with 14 highly autonomous faculties and a record of educating a majority of government ministers and civil servants; 45% of Hungary's student population studies in Budapest. The rest of the public university system comprises five comprehensive universities (Debrecen, Miskolc, Szeged, Pecs and Kaposvar) located in urban centres outside Budapest only one of which has a population of more than 200,000, and five universities of applied science. This would seem strongly to point to the need for reforms based around 'hinterland' provision and a larger input from regions.

However, the most striking fact about Hungarian higher education is that unlike Norway, Portugal, Ireland and the UK (see below) and Germany, student numbers are falling, not increasing, with a reduction of 26% since 2005. The major losers have been the smaller institutions located in the 'hinterland'; the number of institutions (public and private) between the mid 1990s and 2006 fell from 89 to 64. The Government's priorities for modernising the system have been to strengthen political and financial central control rather than to invest in regional development. A minister summed up the government's philosophy in the following words:

The state.....was not able to intervene in universities because of university autonomy, which was OK, but university autonomy doesn't mean that you should be able to use your resources in an inappropriate way [that is contrary to government priorities].
(interview Hungary E5 p 12)

Shortfalls in home student numbers were to be made up by attracting more international students instead of seeking to widen participation from home

students. Universities were 'invited' to become foundations, that is legally financially independent of the state, to incentivise them to be more entrepreneurial and financially self supporting; governing boards were chosen from members of Fidesz, the ruling political party, to reinforce central direction and to enforce an essentially urban vision of a higher education future. In contrast to the very different approaches in Norway and Portugal regional engagement was compelled by making foundation funding dependent on performance in regional activities. The system is thus unbalanced and financially unstable and subject to ideologically driven state interference seemingly indifferent or even hostile to 'left behind' institutions and regions because they appear not to be financially self sustaining.

The United Kingdom

The UK contains both centralised and decentralised higher education systems: the governance of higher education is devolved to Scotland, Wales and N. Ireland as part of a general devolution of political powers to the Scottish, Welsh and N. Irish governments. Wales has adopted a tertiary system which it manages on a partially decentralised basis; Scotland is moving in a tertiary direction; change in N. Ireland is frozen by the absence of a political decision-making body. England, however, which provides 85% of the UK population and the location of over 80% of its 163 universities remains highly centralised. Although there is a concentration of historically elite universities in what is known as 'the Golden Triangle' (Oxford, Cambridge and London) the system is widely dispersed around the country with all the major cities containing at least one university. England does not, therefore, have a 'hinterland' as such (though Scotland does) but in effect it has a distributed 'hinterland'—of 317 local authority districts 260 contain at least one of the country's 20% most economically deprived areas within their boundaries (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government 2019). The clearly defined 'hinterlands' to be found in Norway, Portugal or Ireland, for example, are thus broken down in England into pockets of economically deprived environments across the country arising from de-industrialisation and from historically rural or semi rural areas.

A distinctive feature of UK higher education was that the initial university system was largely created by civic initiative with the 'civic' universities, along with Oxford, Cambridge and London, being brought together in 1919 for central funding purposes under a University Grants Committee (UGC). (It was only in 1946 that the government assumed formal responsibility for the overall funding of the university system). A decisive step towards even greater centralisation was taken in 1992 with the upgrading of the polytechnics to university status. These were second tier local institutions, not unlike the German Fachhochschulen, which were located on the non-university side of a formal binary line and managed by local authorities. The abolition of the binary line resulted in the reinforcement of an already large tightly centralised university system which now encompassed a significantly diversified set of institutions one subset of which was keen to give up its local affiliations to conform with the traditional university model to which it had been promoted.

The university sector has had no formal policy connection with a Further Education sector which has picked up most of the non-degree work abandoned by the polytechnics when they became universities. In 1992 the further education colleges were also removed from local authority and were transferred to central control and now occupy a kind of third tier in the overall higher education system. While their main educational contribution is local and regional they remain subject to central direction and control in spite of the fact that research demonstrates that an overwhelming number of colleges have programmatic links with universities in their region (Shattock and Hunt 2021).

Thus the historical trend of the post War period has been a step by step process of centralisation of higher and further education decision-making: this is now under challenge. The recognition of the growth of gross inequalities between different UK localities and regions and the inability of central government to rectify them has led to a vocal and widespread demand for a policy of 'levelling up' in which further and higher education might be expected to play a leading role. The point is illustrated by a comparison of London's participation rate of 56% with the North East's of 34%. As one senior local figure admitted this is a:

very, very, very clear indicator.....that kids in the North East are less likely to go to university than anywhere else in the country and

that has to reflect what we know about the levels of education, the levels of social deprivation up here (quoted in Shattock and Horvath 2023)

The Government's White Paper on levelling up (Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities 2022) makes almost no reference, however, to the contribution that higher and further education might make and there has been no policy dialogue about the implications for institutions or about sectoral relationships with communities. Research points strongly towards the need for the decentralisation of decision-making to regions and the integration of further and higher education policies at that level in order to address the distributed 'hinterland' issues of local and regional disparity which so evidently now exist (McCann 2019, Shattock and Horvath 2023).

Germany*

Germany offers a striking contrast to the UK and the other countries analysed in not having a 'hinterland' in the sense the dictionaries define. Here higher education is regionalised and controlled by regional governments, the Lander. Germany has thus established a clearly defined decentralised system which, however, retains a strongly centrifugal character derived from close consultation between Lander, between Lander and central government and between both and the German Rectors Conference (Teichler 2018). Most importantly it maintains a principle of homogeneity of provision between the Lander written into its national constitution. The result has been an evenly spread university system across the country largely without reputational highs and lows. Conversely, this homogeneity has stimulated concern that it has inhibited the performance of German universities in international rankings. One result has been the Excellenzinitiative designed to strengthen some universities to be able to compete with institutions from more hierarchically modelled systems elsewhere and to act as flagships within the German system itself. An elite grouping is emerging.

But although Germany's regionalisation seems to have removed the kind of issues associated with hinterlands in other countries a fuller picture reveals that the German system has a particular issue which very much links to the kind of issues faced by countries where 'hinterland' based problems predominate. This

relates to the position of the Fachhochschulen founded in the 1970s whose programmes were initially intended to aim at narrowly regional and vocational issues with a proscription on teaching above the master's level. The Fachhochschulen were directly controlled by Lander governments, had higher teaching hours than universities and lacked the supplementary income provided to universities by the German research foundations. This constituted a binary line as rigorously applied as in the UK except that, unlike the UK, student numbers in universities far exceeded numbers in Fachhochschulen by a factor of three to one. This raises a series of questions: was the primary purpose of a binary line intended to protect universities from pressures that would force them to take on board the need to address regional and vocational economic and social agendas; was it to enable Lander governments to concentrate these 'hinterland' issues in second tier institutions over which they could exercise more direct control or was it that in attracting higher student numbers a much better funded university sector had more political and reputational clout and offered better career prospects?

But the result has been pressure from Fachhochschulen for higher status similar to the campaign for university status by the Institutes of Technology in Ireland. It has been conceded that Fachhochschulen may use the title of 'university of applied science' to external audiences but the crux of the issue revolves around research and the right to award doctorates. In a devolved regional governance system decisions about such questions fall to individual Lander. In 2016 the Hesse Land extended doctoral awarding powers to a Fachhochschule to be followed by North Rhine-Westphalia, Saxony-Anhalt and Baden-Wurtemberg (Upton 2023). There is little doubt that others will follow. Here, therefore, we have a significant change in the structure of higher education launched from below, from regional sources not from central policymaking. The German regional system of higher education governance may have eliminated 'hinterland' policy issues but 'bottom up' pressures from within Lander promise step by step and Lander by Lander to modernise a previously bureaucratically structured institutional system.

Issues arising from the study

Disparities of quality and reputation between institutions may have many causes but history and location are amongst the most fundamental. The extension of higher education into 'hinterlands' raises significant questions of system management and development, generally unrecognised or unspoken when the initial policy decisions were made. The gap between long established universities in affluent cities and new, merged or upgraded institutions in rural or semi rural areas is difficult to bridge and can represent a dominant policy issue in system governance.

A key issue in these institutions is the place of research and the related question of the power to award doctorates. Wrapped up in both are questions of funding and of fundamental mission. It is clear that different countries have approached them differently. Should government and institutions accept as given a division between first and second tiers of institutions, and should this be formally recognised in something like a binary line while recognising the inevitable pressures from second tier institutions to achieve equality of status with a first tier that this study illustrates? Should the line be based on research record even though this unfairly penalises newly formed institutions in 'hinterland' areas? Norway and Portugal both suggest ways to alleviate the position. Alternatively, should the student market be left to decide but this can leave institutions starved of resources and unable to grow if students vote with their feet to continue to seek places in the long established universities?

Governments thus face awkward choices in managing systems which span so many different institutional histories and objectives. Such choices can absorb inordinate energy in building bulwarks to restrain institutional ambition or conversely in creating bureaucratic regulatory frameworks which impose limitations on the freedoms of the long established institutions. These concerns can crowd out discussion of wider educational issues and can generate controversy which militates against institutional collaboration. The evidence of this study is that binary lines are inevitably overtaken by institutional and sometimes regional pressures to create a level institutional playing field. When they are removed, they leave a residual reputational divide which takes many

years to overcome. Increasingly we may expect systems to move towards equality of institutional status but closer linkages between mission and funding.

Relationships between university and non-university post-secondary systems have become critical in the age of 'universal' higher education. Local colleges like those in the Further Education sector in the UK can reach much further down into the community than most universities and can provide vitally important alternative routes into higher education. This points strongly towards the adoption of tertiary education systems which integrate policy decisions in the two sectors and in which regional authorities are closely engaged. In many countries this would involve substantial restructuring of decision-making processes but would bring greater coherence, the elimination of policy overlaps and, at a regional level, a more comprehensive and collaborative set of relationships between institutions. This would be of great benefit to students and to 'levelling up' processes. In the UK this would require unwinding structural decisions taken many decades ago.

Our research has also thrown up a topic of considerable importance from a public policy and human capital perspective, the relationship between a university's location and where its graduates settle after graduation—the 'graduate deposit' issue. Internationally this is not a well researched area although in many countries a main objective of 'hinterland' policies is not just to provide better opportunities for entry into higher education but also to reinforce the local and regional skill base markets . The 'up and away' issue is all too evident in countries where a few affluent cities dominate graduate labour markets. Government 'levelling up' programmes which concentrate on capital investment such as technology hubs linking research intensive universities with population centres may exacerbate the problem by encouraging the transfer of small firms and graduates away from areas of economic deprivation. For countries to capitalise on their 'hinterland' policies consideration needs to be given to the problem of graduate migration to established urban environments, a common feature in Norway, Portugal, Hungary and Ireland.

The UK illustrates the dilemma: an example would be a first tier research intensive university located in an industrial but also significantly economically deprived area, which because of its competitive student entry, finds only 14%

of its intake coming from its local region and from which only 30% of its graduating class remain in the region, and these mostly in medicine; 50 miles to the south a second tier institution in a considerably more deprived area takes 76% of its intake from its region and returns 71% of its graduates to employment there. In Scotland, where the Highlands and Islands represent a distinctive 'hinterland', the Highlands and Islands University returns 95% of its completing students, graduate and non-graduate to its region. Problems in defining catchment areas and of data collection make comparisons within countries as well as across countries difficult but what exists forces the conclusion that graduate retention should be seen as an important policy objective and that institutional success in it should be regarded as a reputational plus rather than, as often, a mark of lack of competitiveness in the student market.

What this emphasises is the importance of region and of geophysical factors in the development of higher education and their influence on policy. In Norway, Portugal and Ireland integrating 'hinterland' with metropolitan development has been a major theme over the last two decades, in the UK it promises to become a significant element while in Germany it constitutes the leitmotif of the higher education system as a whole. Previously change in higher education structures was driven primarily by massification—universities simply expanded to match student demand or new universities were founded to reduce the pressure. In this new age new factors have emerged—arguments based on the democratic public good of equalising opportunities between deprived and affluent areas or on direct social and economic needs, and regional characteristics have become much more important in driving higher education system development. It is particularly evident in Norway and Germany in response to equality of opportunity arguments and in Portugal and Ireland in respect to perceived social and economic need. Hungary and the UK stand outside these alignments though one might see some prospect of change in the UK in the public commitment to 'levelling up'. The assessment and comparison of higher education systems is conventionally based significantly on historical factors or on institutional rankings and only tangentially acknowledges the existence of regions and their impact on the way systems are formed. The finding of this study is that they are now central to how systems are constructed.

A second finding is that in most systems the segmentation of institutions within systems through binary lines or institutional designations is breaking down; systems are on the way to becoming more unified. In Europe, at least, the structural systematisation by country as described by Clark in *The Higher Education System* (1983) is being eroded as the idea of a university is changing and expanding (Enders 2023 in Shattock and Horvath 2023). Increasingly institutions are becoming more individualised and their reputations more defined by the diversity of their missions rather than being submerged within externally imposed categories or tiers. This will mean that systems become much less tidy and more complex to manage but institutional ‘bottom up’ determination may offer better prospects for institutional innovation and flexibility in the face of societal change.

Some conclusions

No two countries are the same—their geophysical characteristics, their economies and their political circumstances will differ—but perhaps some general conclusions can be drawn from the evidence provided by these case studies. The first is that governments planning new higher education initiatives in ‘hinterland’ areas need to take a long view of the results not see them as only providing them with responses to immediate needs. Too often initiatives seem to have been the product of political opportunism or susceptibility to local pressures without a proper consideration of a systemic context. Perhaps the most obvious point is to recognise the power of institutional isomorphism at the outset of the process. In all the country case studies we have researched where new institutions have been formed at second or third tier levels the institutions and even the regions lobbied almost immediately for parity of standing and resources with institutions of much longer pedigree and reputation. No institution is satisfied with being a ‘teaching university’ or a strictly ‘regional’ university. The results too often are distracting political campaigns, a distortion of mission and a waste of scarce resources: binary lines, for instance, never seem to survive bottom up pressures for equality with longer established institutions.

Our evidence suggests that all new universities should be expected to be research active from the outset but research might be concentrated in the early

days in one or two subjects only that reflect local or regional characteristics or strengths. A government's ability to invest at the outset in comprehensive research universities is nowadays likely to be very limited but investment in a particular academic area will have an important demonstration effect. Internal academic pressures in 'hinterland' institutions will in general be less sympathetic to any concentration on regional priorities that may have been the early intentions of institutional founders: it is natural for academics to want to pursue their own research interests without constraint. To ensure the retention of a regional mission, therefore, it may be advisable to make provision for a representative regional body to act, consistent with academic freedom and autonomy, as a counterweight to isomorphic pressures. In the long run this will reinforce diversity and resilience within the higher education system as a whole. In particular it might encourage the retention of graduates in the region rather than their migration to metropolitan urban centres.

Above all what this study illustrates is that decisions to establish higher education institutions in 'hinterland' areas must be made in the context of an extended timescale. If successful their regional impact will be profound but to achieve success they should be accorded a greater level of continuous monitoring and review rather than simply being absorbed into the management of an existing higher education scene. They should be recognised as a distinct component of a diversified system.

Note: The accounts of developments in Germany and Ireland draw on 'Higher education and regional engagement in Germany' and 'Regional policy and Ireland's Technological Universities: Balancing national and Institutional ambition' contributions authored by Jurgen Enders and Ellen Hazelkorn respectively to *Universities and Regions: The impact of locality and region on university governance and strategies* Michael Shattock and Aniko Horvath Bloomsbury 2023

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