

Painful separation

England must weigh the impact of a national divorce, Danny Dorling writes



Talk yourself up too much and you begin to talk yourself down. What do prospective students, and more importantly their parents, think when they look at the websites of supposedly “top” English universities? Usually they see hype, especially during the clearing season.

Here is a selection taken from the “about us” web pages of “top” institutions. To preserve anonymity I have inflated each statistic by a few points or ranks upwards: “85 per cent of our students awarded a first or 2.1”, “one of the top 25 universities in the world”, “ranked in the top 20 globally for employer reputation”. One even greets its potential “customers” with a list of a dozen ways in which it ranks highly.

There are some admirable exceptions, but competing on hype is the norm. Often, many different forms of competition are in play at the same time. The elite reveal what they are most sensitive about through the information they choose to present up front. The first statistic on the University of Oxford’s facts and figures page is that “56.8% of places on undergraduate courses went to applicants from the state sector”.

Outside England there is still marketisation, but it is usually subtler. If you look at Scotland’s “leading” universities, you see something that initially appears more modest and very much more European: “We are a broad-based, research intensive institution with a global reach” or “one of Europe’s leading and most distinctive centres for teaching and research”. However, one Scottish institution can’t help mentioning a ranking on its home page: in the “top 20” worldwide. Another wants you to know it is in the “world top 1%”, although it places that fact discreetly.

Scottish universities could easily emulate English hype. They have access to similarly impressive factoids. But in Scotland they don’t have to compete so desperately for students. That country has a different ethos, not least because tuition costs

are not paid for by the student-customer, but by the state.

The picture is similar in Wales, where the private element of tuition fees is much lower than in England. Cardiff University throws almost no facts and figures at its potential customers; it simply says: “Our research has global impact and is led by world-class staff who share their knowledge through teaching.”

Yet Cardiff illustrates how the other countries of the UK are not immune from what is predominantly an English (and partly US) influence. Describing your staff as “world-class” implies that others are simply “continental-class”, or some other insult, one that can easily rebound. Claiming that every individual in your institution is working on some intergalactic plane of mega-ability invites a little journalistic snooping around. Worse still, putting down others tends to reveal insecurity. England is becoming much more insecure in all kinds of ways. Its universities’ websites may be just one set of many portals through which one can see a troubled national soul.

England is facing the possibility of divorce from its somewhat subjugated longest-lasting ally. In classic masculine fashion, its elite universities are trying to pretend that separation isn’t happening. The English tell themselves the Scots don’t really want to leave; and that even if they did, they could not afford to. South of the border, independence is countered with the claim that the institutions of England are so wonderful that this isn’t a serious debate.

When the vote in September comes, it could be a rude awakening for the English. Even if the “no” vote prevails, as is currently likely, questions will begin to be asked about why so many younger Scots could see no great advantage in the union. Why be part of the UK if you have no intention of studying outside Scotland?

The implications of a “yes” to Scottish independence for England have yet to be discussed seriously south of the border, revealing the extent of the prevailing arrogance of the English commentariat. The

English appear to believe that Scotland can’t leave, won’t leave, and that even if it does leave, its leaving will have little effect on us.

Some go against the grain, but more often than not they are Scottish journalists working in England who have clearer vision as a result of their wider field of view. For example, as early as 13 June, Deborah Orr in *The Guardian* suggested that: “If Scotland leaves the union, the collapse of political stability in England will accelerate. A pro-independence vote is a pro-democracy vote, and it’s a shame that it falls to the Scots to shake England from its slumber.”

Similarly, Kevin McKenna suggested that traditional Labour-voting Glaswegians might switch late, despite their mistrust of the Scottish National Party, because: “These deeply reluctant nationalists have begun to realise that they will only have one chance in their lifetimes of bearing witness to change and participating in the construction of a more just and moral society (no matter what it costs the moneyed classes). They know it won’t happen in Cameron and Miliband’s Oxford-run Britain” (10 May, *The Guardian*). I think they would be right. The construction of a more just and moral society looks unlikely if left just to those English boys, trained so similarly and presenting what often looks so similar.

The English, and English universities, don’t yet seriously consider the effect of the Scottish economy being taken out of the union. For that matter, the English don’t think that much about the possible effect on funding or international student numbers of leaving the EU, as may happen if the Conservatives win next year’s general election. We think short term. We worry about clearing students and balancing the books each year. But England would not be the same after divorce from Scotland – and what is currently possible might change south of the border, too.

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