Chapter 3
Reverse Internationalization?
Systems Theory, Brexit, and British Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter first describes UK HE from a systems theory perspective through reflection on the history of UK HE and the current system in relation to the criteria that are used to assess and audit universities. The current position of UK HE within the larger global HE system is then considered through analysis of the latest university rankings lists. Having identified the key elements of the current UK HE system and highlighted the centrality of international academic staff within that system, the rhetoric in the academic and political discourse and the printed media is then focused upon in order to highlight the potential impact of Brexit on how UK HE performs as an open system. A best case/worst case scenario narrative follows, resulting in the recommendation of fast action from the UK government to safeguard the retention and hiring of international faculty, a key element in the enviable current open system that is UK HE.

INTRODUCTION

Brexit, the British Exit from the European Union (EU), scheduled for May, 2019, produces a number of questions that demand careful reflection. From a political perspective, this equates to questions such as: 'Is this a sign of a wider shift away from globalisation?', 'Will other EU member states follow the UK out the door?', 'Will the UK be able to return to having stronger economic and diplomatic ties with Commonwealth countries?', and 'How will Brexit impact upon the British economy in the short, medium, and long term?' While these issues are undoubtedly of great importance for the UK, the EU, and beyond, the discourse of many in the academic community has been dominated by the more specific matter of the effect of Brexit on higher education (HE) in the UK, with some of the key questions here being; 'Will non-UK EU students be subjected to the same fees and conditions as non-EU students?', 'Will there be a downturn in the number of non-UK students overall?, 'Will the conditions and status of EU academic staff change?', 'Will academic staff leave the UK?', and 'Will research opportunities and funding be adversely affected by Brexit?' When the issues at the heart of these questions are viewed from a Systems Theory perspective, the issue of academic staff appears to have the potential to greatly impact upon each of the elements within the UK HE system.

This chapter first describes UK HE from a Systems Theory perspective through reflection on the history of UK HE, and the current system in relation to the criteria that are used to assess and audit universities. The current position of UK HE within the larger global HE system is then considered through analysis of the latest university rankings lists. Having identified the key elements of the current UK HE system and highlighted the centrality of international academic staff within that system, the rhetoric in the academic and political discourse, and the printed media is then focused upon in order to highlight the potential impact of Brexit on how UK HE performs as an open system. A best case/worst case scenario narrative follows, resulting in the recommendation of fast action from the UK government to safeguard the retention and hiring of international faculty, the key element in the enviable current open system that is UK HE.

Systems Theory and UK HE

Systems Theory was developed largely as a reaction to the reductionism approach to describing systems. Rather than simply describing an organisation or system in terms of the parts that make up said entity, systems theory allows for the interaction between elements and the environment with the potential to change

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