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**Can credentialism help to predict the convergence of institutions and
systems of higher education?**

**Jón Torfi Jónasson
Faculty of Social Science
University of Iceland
jtj@hi.is**

<http://www.hi.is/~jtj/>

Since 1993, Jón Torfi Jónasson has been a professor of education in the Faculty of Social Science at the University of Iceland. He was dean of the Faculty of Social Science from 1995 to 2001. His special interests include the development of educational systems, in particular the development of secondary, vocational, higher and adult education. In particular, he has compared Nordic developments in these areas.

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1. Introduction¹

The expansion of higher education (HE) has generally been viewed from two different perspectives. One perspective considers the quantitative expansion of education: its transition from elite education through mass and perhaps even to universal education. Starting with surface aspects, there are a number of quantitative means to describe the expansion of higher education, ranging from the sheer volume of the student body (Diebolt, 2000; T. F. Green, Ericson, & Seidman, 1980; Schofer & Meyer, 2005; Windolf, 1998), to its composition in terms of age, gender, level of study, or educational programme (Jónasson, 1999, 2004a). The other perspective concentrates on structure, whether at the institutional or system level. This normally includes the notion of dynamic transformation of the system (Huisman, 1998; Kyvik, 2006; Neave, 1983; Scott, 1995), with the phenomenon of academic drift playing a central role (Morphew, 2000; Neave, 1979). These two perspectives lack distinct theoretical frameworks, and although their close general relationship has in fact been acknowledged, little attempt has been made to tie them together in a systematic or perhaps causal manner. This paper will therefore elaborate an overall theoretical framework (Jónasson, 2004b, pp. 148-149) to account for macro developments in higher education. While this framework basically relates to European developments (Kyvik, 2004), it provides a kindred comprehension of US developments in higher education, making use of descriptions by Labaree (1997, 2006). The paper suggests a direct, substantial interaction between the focal points of each of the above perspectives. It also proposes that the institutional or system dynamics of HE derive to a considerable extent from the nature of the expansion that is occurring.

The key actors according to the present account are students, then educational institutions and next policy agencies, with the labour market and the economy exerting their influence only from a distance. This is not to say that the labour market is irrelevant; on the contrary, it is instrumental through moulding the environment in which the main forces operate. The comparative approach of this paper will also clarify small differences where large ones might be expected. Previously I have based my argument on European, especially Nordic data (Jónasson, 2003, 2004b), projecting it onto potentially similar US developments. Here I will attempt to relate the European and US developments more closely.

Numerous ingredients of the proposed framework are well known, even to the extent that some of them may be considered common knowledge. Despite this, they are not normally united in a coherent theoretical frame. My paper will attempt to do so, using a perspective that is not often adopted; that is, I will look at the development of institutions of higher education from the perspective of a student body seeking credentials, credentials that provide status. This somewhat resembles the approach of Labaree (1997, p. 4), who suggests that “the school is seen not as a predetermined function but as an institutional actor that is trying to establish a place for itself in a complex market environment”; Labaree characterises his approach as the “credentialing perspective”.²

Veysey (1965, p. 340), in his analysis of university development in the USA, notes that even before the start of the 20th century the American university had entered “a competitive market for money, students, faculty and prestige”. In the following discussion, such concepts will

¹ I am particularly grateful to Svein Kyvik at NIFU-STEP in Oslo for the discussions that led to this paper. I am also grateful to Scancor, at Stanford University for providing me with facilities during the summer 2006 to work on this paper.

² This is in line with the analysis proposed by Jencks and Riesman (1968, p. 61): “but many would argue that education is not a college’s primary function. The crucial *raison d’être* of the American college, the sine qua non of its survival and current importance, may not be education but certification.” As Jencks and Riesman add: “in part, no doubt this is a function of student attitudes.”

play a prominent role, in various guises. Veysey's term, the American university, is also intriguing, and in fact many other writers assume that there might be substantial qualitative differences between the development of US higher education and higher education elsewhere, thinking in particular of Europe. In this paper I will warn against overstating this difference and suggest that the European scene operates on the same principles, even if detailed mechanisms may differ.³

Elaborating the academic drift framework, I will argue here that it is intertwined by a causal mechanism with the influence of credentials, which drives the growth in higher education. My suggestion is that noticing this interaction can usefully shed light on the growth trends of higher education during the past century. The credential account implies that public policy initiatives and the demand for a skilled workforce should be seen as external modulating or facilitating factors rather than as primary causal mechanisms. Thus students (according to this account the primary consumers of education), along with their aspirations for educational credentials, are interpreted as a substantial driving force behind educational expansion. The academic faculty, on the other hand, having a similar aspiration for status, affect the internal structures of institutions and of the system, partly as a response to institutional growth and partly as a method to gain status, which leads to the academic drift that we witness. Furthermore, I will argue that the combination of this drift and the effects of credentialism may be used to predict the path which higher education will follow as it continues to expand well into the 21st century. We will thus begin by examining the credential mechanism and then the phenomenon of academic drift, so that we can study their interaction.

³ In this respect a similar stance is adopted by Rhoades (1990), who compares the lay and academic influences of higher education developments in France, Sweden, the UK and the USA.

2. A credential account of enrolment expansion in higher education

The modern credential account has its roots in Weber's notion of competition among groups who each derive their competitive strength from their educational degrees (Brown, 2001). Individuals and groups thus seek to earn credentials in order to enhance their competitive position in the job market, though this may also be their means of enhancing their social or cultural capital more generally. Along the lines suggested by Bourdieu (1986), the notion of social or cultural capital has a much wider connotation than human capital. The credential mechanism thus contains factors that are functional in a traditional sense, although it also has a much wider and less transparent reference. According to the credential account, the expansion of the student population is at least partly explained by people seeking credentials rather than merely specific skills or specific professional knowledge, although this is not to deny that credentials do signal a wide variety of assets including specific skills. The yearning for credentials becomes coupled with the competitive element in society, because as a greater number of people acquire a certain credential which turns out to be valuable, more people will seek it. Demand grows in the manner of a spiral: the more people who receive a credential, the greater the inducement for other people to follow suit. Discussing the development of vocational education in Europe, Green, Wolf and Leney (1999, p. 164) suggest that "once a certain proportion ... has a given qualification ... the pressure on the others to follow becomes very great". A micro analysis of the mechanisms in this process would definitely consider a variety of social groups or strata, such as class and gender (Boudon, 1974; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Müller, Ringer, & Simon, 1987). In a given society, it is possible and even likely that competition between groups or strata, and not only within them, drives the seeking of credentials. Accordingly, this account may be called the status competition account of educational expansion, as well as the credential account, at least as far as the HE sector is concerned. Developed in recent years by Collins (1979), this idea was further elaborated by Brown (1995, 2001) and by Labaree (1997). Their elaboration dealt with the development of HE in the US, and its strength derived *inter alia* from the fact that it fitted and was able to account for developments there during an extended period covering the late 19th century and the biggest part of the 20th. Furthermore, it was possible to underpin their analysis with empirical data, because it essentially demonstrated how the stability of growth exhibited in the US system had more affinity with status conflict accounts than any alternative accounts. Since Weber, however, little attempt has been made to apply this idea generally to expansion phenomena in Europe. However, it has been argued (Jónasson, 2003) that both the long-term regularity of the expansion indicated by some Nordic data and in particular the exponential form of this regularity lend support to credential interpretations. Thus both qualitative and quantitative evidence point to the viability of a credential account.

2.1 The importance of status competition

Inherent in the status conflict account is status or prestige. As regards educational institutions and as evidenced in contemporary viewpoints, status becomes attached to the institutions and by implication to the credentials of their students, teachers and researchers. In the present context such status affects or even controls two of the major agents in the arena of higher education. The first of these agents is the students, who are driven in their quest for cultural capital by the credentials which various bodies in the system confer. The second, very significant agent is each educational body, as composed of those interrelated partners within HE, the faculty and the institution to which they belong.

Credentialism implies that the value of a credential, first and foremost a university degree, is conveyed by the degree as a formal declaration, rather than by its explicit content, which is the particular knowledge or skills it certifies. This means that the capital implicit in a degree

or credential is as much tied to the form, the reputation (cf. status attainment theories) or the image of the degree as to its content, so that its value is no less symbolic than concrete. This characteristic nonetheless varies greatly both between and within national cultures. Thus I suggest that this characteristic is fuzzy, conforming with Bourdieu's (1986) ideas on cultural as well as on social capital, although he speaks of academic credentials as one form of cultural capital. Perhaps the term 'credential capital' could be used for pointing to the versions of capital involved in a degree.

Insofar as a credential mechanism proves fully effective, it dictates the options students seek and thus, to the extent that the educational establishment is responsive, may reform either the internal or external structure of education, or both. This, in turn, directly and constantly changes the value of the credentials. That has a spiralling effect and shifts both the student population and educational structure gradually in the direction of nominally greater credential capital, perceived as involving added academic, cultural or social capital. Thus a crucial factor in the evolution described here is student desire for this capital; the yearning of students to achieve it is among the primary causal agents of HE developments, indeed exercising more impact than industry, the government, unions or the educational institutions themselves, even though these are also important agents in moulding the system and in turn student aspirations.

What is it actually that the population of students wants? This population of course has endless sorts of diverse desires, with perhaps no two individuals harbouring identical aspirations. To complicate matters, these desires may vary through time, in each and every individual, so that the issue of educational choice is certainly a complex one. For example, the theory of relative risk aversion (Van der Werfhorst & Andersen, 2005) suggests that a powerful factor guiding decisions on whether to embark on further education (and if so presumably what options to select) is the strong inclination to avoid downward social mobility. In the situation of credentials continuously becoming more abundant, the pressure rises on each social group constantly to elevate its reference level. Institutions and policy makers, for their part, must also remain ceaselessly on guard to ensure that the niche they offer their student body is right. Thus theories of risk aversion apply very well to the trends of academic drift evidenced by institutions and governments.

In the present context, we can say that at least in the US setting there are two main actors or agencies. One is the student and her family, the other is the schools or colleges. Of course, there is considerable interaction between these two agents.⁴ At the level of student educational choices, it is neither the government with its educational policy nor industry with its salary structures or credential requirements that directs the student into a particular school or programme, even though it is clear that these agencies may certainly facilitate access or provide some of the incentives for climbing the educational ladder. The first of the three phases in a model for college choice is having the predisposition or aspiration to go to college in the first place (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). This is of course a decisive factor, whether it is the students, their parents or other agents which are instrumental in this respect (see a review by Pitre, Johnson, & Pitre, 2006). In the second stage (searching) and again in the third stage (selecting), the colleges themselves become the principal actors, and in these phases competition between colleges reveals itself as a crucial factor. In the US setting, this has been the case for a long time. Veysey (1965, p. 340) notes that the American university began competing for students even before the close of the 19th century, and according to Levine (1986, pp. 16-17) "even the most prestigious colleges were in the 1920's scrambling to fill their classes ... and admitting many with academic credentials below their stated admission requirements." There is no doubt that the competition between US colleges and universities has been constant and fierce for a long time, even though its nature changed substantially

⁴ See a review by Kinzie et al. (2004) of the development of college choice in the USA, viewed from the student's perspective.

throughout the past century (Kinzie et al., 2004). At least within US higher education, it is clear, and moreover corresponds with the credential account, that both students (along with their families) and the institutions themselves have been very important players in the expansion process. This in no way denies that both state and federal policies have been instrumental in modulating the expansion, above all to ensure equality of access among socioeconomic classes and ethnic groups, but the point made here is that official intervention has not been a causal factor in enticing the young to go to college.

Put more bluntly, even if the official policy were to enhance HE enrolment by creating new slots or by offering financial aid, this would not in itself suffice if students did not want to enter these slots, or if they (and their parents) saw no purpose in it. On the other hand, these policy measures would of course facilitate access to any potential student population that in itself felt willing. Governments could also restrict access to higher education (as they have often – if not normally – done) by limiting the slots on offer. Thus I draw a clear distinction between a casual role and a modulating (facilitating or inhibiting) role.

To relate this aspect to the present context and in order better to explain this complex as regards the students, I suggest there being three ingredients that lead in constituting a student's list of aspirations: status (including the option of social mobility), recognition (including the educational transferability of a degree) and favourable opportunities to earn a living. It is the blend of these ingredients that determines what educational option the student will opt for. We must nevertheless keep in mind that all three factors are important, as well as their blend in each case. For some people, any one factor may suffice if its value ranks high enough, whereas for most people all three are required, and their exact balance is decisive.

What then determines the desirability of each educational option and what decides its value? As students ponder an educational option, they inspect its every feature, at least implicitly: the general status attached to it, the future options it keeps open, and its anticipated pecuniary reward. What is most important in this process is that as the value of one of these features diminishes, in relative terms, one or both of the others may have to increase correspondingly in value in order to retain total attractiveness to the student. Should the composite value of an educational option fall below a certain level, the potential student body may start to shift its choices towards options with a higher total value. This can of course be countered; in fact, it may not be feasible or even necessary to increase the monetary rewards of the option that is on the verge of losing out. It may actually suffice (and be within the purview of the active agents, e.g. governments or institutions) to shore up credential value by enhancing status, for example by transferring a college programme to a university or by elevating a programme to the next higher degree, such as from the bachelor to master level. By these means, educational institutions and systems may be manipulated in order to counter the changing interests of students.

3. Institutional mobility and systemic modifications

Collins (2000, p. 235), echoing Veysey (1965), presents a commonly accepted US view by suggesting that since the 1920s, when the basic structure of the US education system had achieved its form, the adjustment of the higher education system “has been quantitative, not qualitative ... “. However, this is perhaps not entirely fair, for two reasons. Firstly, there were substantial quantitative changes before this period, and though Collins of course acknowledges them, he may have undervalued the continuity or regularity with which this expansion extended into and throughout the period following 1920. Secondly and more tellingly, there may have been substantial qualitative adjustments too, even if Collins could be defended in his claim by arguing that these modifications can to a certain extent be quantified and that they essentially produced increases in the same vein. What is of particular interest in the present context are indeed modifications of a particular type, where the units within the HE system, and sometimes the system itself, are seen as progressing in a certain direction. In particular, it should attract our interest if the system can be seen as converging, which does not however preclude that it may be diverging as well.

There are four categories or dimensions of institutional modifications that are of particular interest through their relationship to these adjustments, both at the micro and macro levels. Two of these four, which may but do need not to be orthogonal to each other, fall under what is below explained as academic drift within the higher education system. These two categories are academic institutional drift as it is discussed by Morphew (2000) and Neave (1979) and the vocational or professional programme drift as discussed by Grubb and Lazerson (2004) as well as specifically for the US by Brint (2002) and for Europe by Green et. al (1999).⁵ To this Labaree (2006) adds a compromise version, where he agrees with his US colleagues with respect to the purpose or mission of HE (which has edged towards professionalisation) but not with respect to the actual content of the changes taking place (which he claims are more liberal or theoretical than the mission statements imply).⁶ To continue by delineating the third and fourth categories or dimensions of institutional modifications, there is the related notion of convergence (or perhaps divergence) within or between institutions (Birnbaum, 1983; Kerr, 1994a), which potentially involves at least two dimensions (Huisman, 1998).⁷ Thus the third dimension encompasses the differences or similarities among institutions (external diversity); i.e., they may be becoming more or less similar. The final or fourth dimension describes the breadth of programmes within institutions (internal diversity), since their overall scope may similarly tend to shrink or widen. These two may again be orthogonal, so that with reference to these two dimensions it might be possible to accommodate a claim for both, increased diversity and convergence. These four dimensions will be discussed within the general framework of academic drift, as it provides a useful explanatory concept.

3.1 The notion of academic drift

Academic drift refers to the tendency of institutions, a student body or study programmes to drift or shift⁸ towards an institutional setting or a curriculum that is emphatically based on

⁵ Saying that these two dimensions are potentially orthogonal means that a programme or institution may migrate within the system without modifying its professional or academic mission. Vice versa, an institution may become more or less professionally oriented in its mission without changing its position within the system. Despite these possibilities, a change in one dimension is often accompanied by a change in the other.

⁶ A somewhat similar point is made by Green et. al (1999, pp. 159-161), arguing that the classification of vocational courses within the European system does not always reflect their content or function.

⁷ Huisman speaks of diversification, but notes that various terms are used in that discussion, for instance when referring to homogenisation (dedifferentiation) and heterogenisation trends (pp. 81, 89).

⁸ The term drift is used here not only in keeping with tradition, but also because from a bird's eye view

school and texts or on research and theory.⁹ It is inherent to the present thesis that academic drift is a primary characteristic of long-term educational development.

The notion of academic drift seems to have been deduced from at least two different environments. On the one hand it was derived from certain developments in the UK, especially by Pratt and Burgess (1974), and later elaborated by Neave (Neave, 1979, 1983) who also invoked examples from France, Norway and the former Yugoslavia to support his arguments. On the other hand it was derived from developments in the USA (Riesman, 1956), where the dynamics were however described in similar terms (Morphew, 2000). The phenomenon has gradually been analysed in greater detail and is still being recognised in additional cultures, though sometimes under different guises; recent examples were in Canada by Skolnik (2005), Europe by Kyvik (2006) and the Nordic countries specifically by Jóhannsdóttir (2006). Particularly important for our discussion is the dynamics being described in the institutional arena, because we must take them into account within any typology of HE structure (Neave, 1983; Rhoades, 1990).

My proposal is to divide academic drift into four different but highly related categories.

Institutional academic drift: In the general discourse on HE, the term *academic drift* seems most often to be applied to the transfer of single institutions within the institutional hierarchy, allowing them to confer more prestigious degrees than before. The drift of such institutions is towards academia, here understood in a rather traditional sense as an institution which concerns itself mainly with theory and probably research. There are two sub-categories of institutional academic drift: vertical drift and lateral drift. The vertical version would typically include transfers between educational sectors, most notably as vocational schools become polytechnics or professional schools become research universities (Morphew, 2000; Neave, 1979). In terms of everyday parlance, academic drift can be called upward drift. The primary agents in this progression may be either the institutions themselves or governmental agents.¹⁰ The lateral version of institutional academic drift would be two institutions merging which ostensibly have an equal status. Ordinarily, a predominantly vocational or professional institution is merged with another sort of institution, typically a university, which enjoys more prestige and is more theoretically oriented. The new, combined institution assumes to all intents and purposes the character of the higher-prestige organisation.¹¹

This account often has a missing link, as it tends to ignore the void left at the lower-prestige level after an instance of institutional academic drift. While that void may need filling by a new type of institution, there is not always a definite candidate for replacing the merged

these phenomena would appear to be slowly drifting, although this does not deny there being any agency.

⁹ The term “academic” refers however to at least two variants, the theoretical and the liberal. These should be distinguished, in each case for both the vertical and lateral types of academic drift. The former variant indicates the shift from practical or vocational studies to more theoretical studies, or to degrees towards which the programme has in a literal sense become more theoretical (see also the section below on curricular drift). Thus a vocational school that becomes a polytechnic, or a polytechnic that becomes a university, may still be devoted to its vocational or professional mission, but implements this mission in a more academic mode than before. We may call this the theoretically dominated variant of academic drift. The other variant of academic drift signifies a shift from vocational or professional emphasis towards a principally liberal mission. Concomitantly, the content changes. This variant may be called the liberal version of institutional academic drift. A clear distinction must be made between the two variants, as a programme can in principle become more academic, but less liberal, i.e. with less options outside the confines of the narrowly defined discipline. In principle the shift we observe may be in either direction, i.e. towards either more or less academic emphasis, and perhaps even to a hybrid of the two. Thus Labaree (2006) has suggested that when apparently the HE sector has become more vocationally or professionally oriented, this is only in its scope or declared mission, whereas its content has developed in keeping with the theoretical version of academic drift.

¹⁰ Rhoades (1990) describes how in different systems the actual balance of influence may shift between lay forces outside academia and academics themselves, even while the government may be thought of as the responsible agency.

¹¹ For the sake of completeness one might suggest that in some cases drift should be characterised as oblique, i.e. as partly vertical and partly horizontal.

institution. Here government often comes into play, generally with a vocational option of some sort. Governments have a variety of motives, and the variety of institutional replacements is also greatest at the bottom levels, where we inevitably find the widest diversity, decreasing as one moves up the academic hierarchy.

System drift: The second category refers to the drift of a system from heterogeneity towards greater homogeneity, with an outcome dominated by the academic institutions that have the highest status in the particular spectrum. This outcome is largely the result of institutional drift. The basic process is described well by Archer's (1979) process of *systematisation*; indeed, she claims that the "competitive conflict ... introduces an internal restructuring of education itself" (1986, p. 17).¹² Thinking broadly, one might look upon the classification into different categories (Neave, 1983), totalling perhaps four (Scott, 1995), as representing a dynamic continuum, which moves or drifts away from a university-dominated system, through a dual system, towards and then through a binary system and onwards to a unified system, perhaps subsequently to resume at the starting point. This contemplation recalls Tyack and Cuban's (1995) theory about the cycles of educational ideas.

Content or curricular drift: The third category rests within the institutional framework and involves the tendency of individual programmes to become academic in character without any direct or explicit institutional change (A. Green et al., 1999, pp. 158, 161; Jónasson, 1998). This is a vital part of the analysis provided by Labaree (2006) when he suggested that academia by these means shifts its curriculum towards the theoretical or even liberal, in spite of the programmes superficially appearing to become ever more pragmatic. Green et al. (1999, p. 158) also suggest that this academic drift stems partly from how vocational programmes are regarded both by the students and the institutions as preparatory for higher education, and therefore take on the nature of academic tracks, leading to further academic goals. Thus their vocational classification may remain intact while their function actually changes. Green et al. contend that this is one version of academic drift, and I am including it in the curricular category. Drift in this category, however, is the least transparent among the four categories, only to be observed when inspecting the ingredients of programmes, in particular upon calculating the relative amount of time that those enrolled in vocational or professional programmes spend in an apprenticeship setting.¹³ Thus vocational programmes may retain their general classification even though their operations are gradually switched from being work-based to text-based.

The drift of the student body: Normally the term academic drift refers to institutional characteristics. This category entails using it also to refer to student traits, which is in line with previous conclusions (A. Green et al., 1999, p. 160; Jónasson, 1997). It is assumed that students (perhaps tacitly) weigh the functional features of a programme versus its general status, for a variety of pragmatic reasons and also controlled by a variety of implicit constraints, notably related to social class or gender. This category furthermore takes note of how the student body as a corpus prefers vocationally or professionally oriented programmes, but only when the programme status weighs "sufficiently" against the status of academic programmes. Normally favouring an academic bent, students begin to drift towards academic programmes to the degree that discrepancies in programme status grow. I have argued that this phenomenon is clearly exhibited by the unflinching development of secondary academic education in the Nordic countries throughout the 20th century, whereby the student population has chosen academically-based programmes in preference to vocationally-based programmes (Jónasson, 1997, 2003) and where similar patterns were evidenced in tertiary education

¹² Archer postulates four stages in the development of educational systems: the unification of a system (which does not necessarily imply centralisation), systematisation, differentiation and specialisation. Even though her scheme applies to an entire system, it may be useful when inspecting the development of a major sub-system such as the system of HE.

¹³ Green et al. (1999, pp. 157-165) note that academic drift of this kind is often completely hidden by official statistics and explain for us how such statistics can be misleading in this respect.

(Jónasson, 1999). This is as yet most evident at the secondary level and most noticeable in the educational systems which offer students a considerable choice among types of school (A. Green et al., 1999, see Chapter 4 on secondary, Chapter 5 on higher education). The status of individual programmes is determined partly by their value as an admission ticket to the next educational level above. Thus when a range of vocational institutions that have had problems with recruiting students at the secondary level are shifted to the tertiary or university level, they gain popularity and thrive once more. This may result in the appearance of “practical” education being on the upswing and of the tertiary level turning more vocational and varied (Grubb & Lazerson, 2004, especially the discussion in Chapter 2). According to the view presented here, however, this is directly due to status relationships and may thus prove transitory. The tension between vocational or professional education and what is here termed academic education may however be a very important contributor to the other categories of drift described below, i.e. those that are in addition to the four academic categories which we have just addressed.

4. Are there links between the growing weight of credentials and the evolution of institutions or systems?

The thesis presented here is that the development of post-secondary educational systems may be quite responsive to the moulding forces exerted by students – not only to their sheer numbers but in a more subtle and far-reaching way to their goals and aspirations. Thus a variety of structural changes within institutions and systems, such as those described for Western Europe by Kyvik (2004) and in particular the phenomenon of academic drift (as described above), may at least partly be traced to students or to external forces involving them (Jónasson, 2004b; Labaree, 1997; Neave, 1979). It will specifically be argued that a considerable affinity exists between the expected effects of credentialism and a variety of academic drift ingredients at the programme, institutional and system level and that this affinity appears even in contrasting systems, for instance in many European countries, in Canada (Skolnik, 2005) and in the USA (Labaree, 2006; Thelin, 2004).

4.1 Student body expansion and institutional development

We have suggested that credentialism is largely responsible for growth of the student body. But does the story end there? Or do students have an impact that requires us to consider them as influential actors in moulding the educational system?

Especially during the Middle Ages, when student guilds controlled some of the universities,¹⁴ and occasionally since that time, the students of universities and perhaps of some other educational institutions have exercised administrative powers and thus influenced the system. That is not what is meant here but rather how the behaviour of students as consumers of higher education has much more generally led to the shaping of institutional developments.

While the current account is presented as a universal or generic portrayal, the internal mechanisms of individual systems may vary considerably (compare Archer, 1979; A. Green et al., 1999; Skolnik, 2005, on how we may arrive at similar situations through different mechanisms). One pillar of the credential argument is that it is in itself independent of educational systems and is thus oblivious to possible differences between the USA, Canada and various European countries, even though its US proponents have suggested that credentialism might thrive best within their own HE system. Assuming the effect to be universal, however, still allows for institutional or system responses in various countries to vary somewhat, not least through greater visibility of the governmental level in centrally controlled systems. Therefore, we will once again attempt to argue that qualitatively similar patterns to those observed in the USA appear also in more centrally controlled systems.

Writing on the transition to mass education, Trow (1974) discussed a variety of its intra-institutional effects, primarily stemming from sheer increases in the numbers of students at individual institutions. He also noted the constant reaction of HE institutions to this expansion and their consequent growing pains during the 1950s and '60s in Europe and particularly in the US (Trow, 1972). Nonetheless, further systematic treatment of this interaction seems rather lacking in later discussion on the expansion of higher education.

How then does student influence function? Wanting a valuable education to ensure their quality of life, students select the programmes that are likely to produce this outcome, with a reasonable effort on their part. Their motivation may be complex: for example a combination

¹⁴ Some of the first Italian universities were totally controlled by students, in particular Bologna (except for the execution of exams). See Rashdall's description of student universities (Rashdall, Powicke, & Emden, 1936, pp. 148-149).

of desires to obtain an interesting, comfortable, well-paid job, to be accepted and respected by their peers, and to keep their options open within the ever-growing educational flora. What will best help to achieve this is probably always in a state of flux. Moreover, the institutions must deal with this situation too, if they want to retain an inflow of the calibre of students that they are used to and hopefully even enhance it. This affects institutions in at least three ways: it affects their internal operations, it affects their mission and policy and it affects their relationship with the two bodies which they must address in this matter – the students they interact with and the policy bodies they associate with.

My hypothesis is that student aspirations, wishes or prejudices may heavily influence how the higher education landscape unfolds. To round out the picture, however, it seems impossible to present a plausible story of this evolution without bringing in political agencies, first and foremost those at the national level, but sometimes also regional or local agencies. There are a number of points that need to be made. The first is to affirm that, yes, governments make a difference everywhere, even in the USA, where government intervention is frequently considered minimal. Second, most government initiatives relevant to the issue of expansion are the direct or indirect responses of government to the dynamics of the actual or potential student body. Third, system-wide government action tends to be geared towards enriching the vocational or professional flora at the lower end of the HE ladder; however, the divergence created at that end of the spectrum diminishes farther up the ladder, due to convergence as drift progresses towards the top end. This phenomenon makes it imperative for us to consider both the university and non-university sectors when studying trends within higher education. Fourth, government actions or inactions tend, on balance, to be not only enabling and even stimulating, but also restraining and even stifling, as far as expansion is concerned. Fifth, government policy may, in this arena, sometimes have quite the opposite effect to that intended. Most of the above issues are intertwined, so let us now turn to all of them together.

In every country there are laws that to some extent determine the form and environment of higher education. These laws normally have something to say about the structure of the system and its finances, and in many cases they institute student-aid programmes and deal with issues of equality. Apart from such very superficial similarities, however, educational systems seem to vary widely, as do the societies in which the systems are embedded. It would therefore be surprising if their institutions demonstrated highly similar responses, unless they were caused by common, quite powerful mechanisms (Meyer, Ramirez, Frank, & Schofer, 2005).

On the surface, the US higher education system seems subject to less government control or influence than most corresponding systems, even if the government actually plays an important role at the federal, state and local levels, and has done so for a long time. This is not evident at first sight; in fact, the federal Higher Education Act seems weak for this purpose, as it is largely concerned with financial aid to students or to institutions, or programmes with the objective of opening access. Thus this legislation does little to shape the system as such. As for the accreditation of HE institutions, it is conducted by independent agencies, initially established by the institutions themselves.¹⁵ Individual states, on the other hand, have HE boards and run state universities, substantially supporting them with state funds.^{16 17} Furthermore, a number of major government initiatives have definitely affected the

¹⁵ In all there are six regional agencies responsible for accrediting US higher-education institutions (Alderman, 2005).

¹⁶ Around the recent turn of the century, approximately 40% of public university revenue came on average from state appropriations, according to Longanecker (2006, see Chart 3). The highest contribution was to baccalaureate and master colleges, and at those institutions student payments ranked in second place, providing nearly a third of college funds (see also *Digest of Educational Statistics*, 2005).

¹⁷ Even the private universities may receive substantial government funding. Stanford University, for example, states that 87% of its research funds for 2005 stem from federal sources, even though it has no committed government funds.

HE sector as a whole, and some of these initiatives have occurred at the federal level. Among them was the 19th-century federal legislation which provided the basis for land-grant universities,¹⁸ as well as the GI bill of 1944, which provided substantial aid to veterans wanting to attend college.¹⁹ The category of government influence also includes the locally supported two-year junior colleges which became community colleges²⁰ and have also received support at state and federal level. Among the best-known of the state-level frameworks for determining the structure of higher education is the California Master Plan,²¹ issued in 1960 through the California Act. The Plan dictates in quite strict terms three layers within the Californian higher education system: the University of California (UC), which can in addition to all other degrees award PhDs, California State University (CSU), and the California community college system (CCC).²²

The above points reveal the major concerns of many government measures relating to higher education. Governments attempt to ensure equality both by establishing institutions for those who tend to be excluded from or not attracted to the HE system and also by setting up financial aid programmes and paying for a goodly part of the system as a whole. In addition, governments endeavour, largely on the basis of human capital arguments, to ensure useful education for industry outside of the traditional universities (the examples above were land-grant universities and the community colleges). At the same time they also attempt to restrain the mushrooming of prestigious educational tracks²³ by erecting barriers to them (exemplified above by the California Act) as well as by establishing and supporting community colleges, often quite enthusiastically, so as to diversify the base of HE structure.

These facets of government policy have perhaps rarely been so transparently expressed as during the 1970s attempt to revamp the UK higher education system. A binary system was established by founding the polytechnics, based on a very clearly articulated policy of equality, functional relevance and a demarcation between the university and non-university systems (which was intended to relieve the universities of some pressure) (Pratt & Burgess, 1974). Perhaps because the egalitarian principles were so clearly expressed by the minister of education at the time, Anthony Crosland, the clear differentiation in status that emerged between the two types of higher education became even more glaring. In any case, this development shows that there were certainly similar lines of thought dominating system modifications on both sides of the Atlantic.

Labaree (1997, Chapter 1) argues that three goals have dominated the development of US education: *democratic equality*, *social mobility* and *social efficiency*. Similar characteristics were reflected by Prokou's analysis (2006) of higher education developments in France, Germany and Greece during the latter part of the 20th century. Prokou feels that the policy concepts *equality* and *efficiency* aptly describe the major patterns of government actions in these countries. Like most other European countries, these three are highly centralised, even

¹⁸ Most often mentioned as an example of this is the Morrill Land Grant Act, signed by Lincoln in 1862, see Kerr (1994b, pp. 35-37). In fact, the encouragement of states to establish colleges through the proceeds of land sales was an ongoing process, as Thelin remarks (2004, pp. 75-83), although there may always be some tendency to overestimate the importance of a single undertaking such as the land-grant movement, see e.g. Brown (1995, pp. 86-100).

¹⁹ Thelin (2004, pp. 262-268).

²⁰ Thelin (2004, pp. 249-251) along with Breneman and Nelson (1981, pp. 16-17) show that at the middle of the 20th century the local contribution was over 40%. Now it has declined to 20%, while the state contribution is 45% and student fees account for about 20%.

²¹ See <http://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/regents/regmeet/july02/302attach1.pdf>, where the main points of the original plan are presented.

²² Birnbaum (1983, pp. 73-75) laments the convergence of US colleges, which he argues is partly caused by a variety of state, supra-state and federal regulations that gradually channel these institutions into the same mould.

²³ Of a Californian cohort, 12% was expected to go to the University of California, while the state system was expected to draw from the top third of the cohort and community colleges from the cohort as a whole. See Kerr (1994a, p. 128), including Chapter 8 in its entirety on his view of the Master Plan, as he was its main author.

though at least France and Germany had explicit policies aimed at slightly loosening centralisation. All three countries had policies directed towards greater access and all three made attempts to establish vocationally relevant non-university institutions, although these did not succeed in Greece. According to Prokou (2006), the goal of efficiency refers on the one hand to ensuring that HE contributes to the economy, and on the other hand to reducing enrolment pressure on universities. Willimas (1992, p. 292) suggested that both the Australian and UK governments, who transformed their systems from dual through binary to unified at roughly the same time, expanded their non-university sectors during the last part of the 20th century in order to receive the “increased flow of school leavers who were qualified and eager to enrol in degree courses”. Thus even though the details are different, we see over the long term similar government policy patterns in all of the European countries so far mentioned, together with Australia and the USA. This highly resembles the pattern elucidated by Neave (1979) not only for the UK but also France, Norway and the former Yugoslavia, and even more specifically the patterns described by Kyvik (2004), who listed the policy endeavours of a number of European countries, albeit the most interesting were parallel government manoeuvres within the non-university sector. Skolnik (2005) described similar changes within the Canadian system, where the college sector, perhaps comparable to US community colleges, is gradually gaining university status, i.e. experiencing considerable academic drift, and the system as a whole is thus gaining resemblance to a binary system. Looking farther, we see similar government measures and developments in many of the developed countries, backed by the same rationale.

One of the primary policy issues in most European countries during the latter part of the 20th century was quite clearly how to classify various institutions. According to Kyvik’s analysis (2004, Table 1), practically every European system is a binary system, i.e. one that classifies all post-secondary education as HE and then divides it into the two categories of universities and non-universities. Students, however, are sensitive to the programmes they are allowed to choose from, as Kyvik (2004) notes through a number of examples. The short-cycle programmes (*diploma universitario*) offered by the Italian system in the 1990s, for instance, “were not regarded as attractive by students or academic staff” (p. 397), which apparently resulted in their elevation into the university system in 2001. In Greece, technological education institutions were set up in the 1980s to replace the previous technical schools (KATEE), since they “were not accepted by the Greek population, who only valued university education” (Prokou, 2006, p. 203). The German *Länder* decided in 1968 to upgrade the technical and vocational schools in Germany to *Fachhochschulen*, partly in order to “raise the standard and reputation of these institutions” (Prokou, 2006, p. 199). A German attempt to merge colleges and universities was not successful, because “the majority of students chose prolonged academic studies in preference to shorter vocational courses” (Kyvik, 2004, p. 400). As far as Finland was concerned, “short-cycle vocational programmes were neither attractive to students nor sufficiently adapted to the changing labour market” (Kyvik, 2004, p. 401). The HBOs in the Netherlands, through a series of law reforms, gained a firm status within a binary system as a non-university sector in 1986, and “now enjoy a far higher status” (Kyvik, 2004, p. 399). The prime issue might not be the length of educational programmes, but their status within the hierarchy, and there are examples of short courses outside the university system which enjoy considerable popularity, as was the case in Austria. Nevertheless, the *Fachhochschule* Studies Act of 2002 introduced university-level degrees into the *Fachhochschulen* (Wadsack & Kasparovsky, 2004), despite these not being considered a part of the higher education system (Kyvik, 2004, p. 398).

Most countries in Europe have developed from a university-dominated system, through a dual system and into a binary system. The proportion of students on each side of the demarcation line varies substantially between countries (Kyvik, 2004, Table 2), which shows that even though all the systems seem to progress in the same direction, the internal mechanisms and details can vary widely. Kyvik’s table, which shows the non-university sector as receiving from 10 to 75% of the students in binary systems, also illustrates very clearly that the

problem is not to attract students to attend the non-university sector. The evidence presented here indicates instead that if there is a question of status, students will hardly be attracted to it, even though the government and perhaps even industry seem to think they ought to be.

Governments try to steer the flow of students by tampering with the system, using two measures: adding to the non-university sector and limiting access to the university sector. They would have no need of this if the flow were already consistent with the ideal, i.e. if the students' own good sense and the market somehow guided them in line with government policy. Generally expressed, that policy is to ensure equality and achieve a broad distribution of students among the options at secondary or tertiary level, rather than to receive an overabundance of enrolment in often less practical university courses. The problem for the government and perhaps for employers is not that the students lack a desire to complete more education, because clearly many of them do wish to, and in relatively rising numbers, if they have a chance. Rather, the problem is that they seem not to make the "right" choices, as too many of them wanted to enrol in high-status institutions. The government solution is to introduce diverse options, ostensibly relevant for jobs, at the base of the HE system, thereby catering both to industry and those students who want more education but are not interested in university programmes. The hope is that student flow into the university system will be stemmed by offering more such alternative routes, which if possible are also kept shorter. Sometimes the vocational options seem to succeed, at least temporarily, sometimes not. Quite obviously this depends on the relative status students attach to the various options. What should most interest us, therefore, is what determines this status. Presumably it is created by various factors in society at large. Also, it is probably strongly impacted by how positively the government manages to define the image of its new creations, the freshly introduced and ostensibly relevant institutions. In the long run, however, this status will probably be determined largely by how programme graduates are treated in the labour market in terms of salary and respect. Despite this, a final point upheld by statistics is that even though graduates are well received, this may not suffice to direct student flow to those programmes. A final important allocator of status is probably the education system itself.

The unintended and sometimes counter-productive effects of government policy may leave the government in a quandary. Sometimes a well-intentioned but narrow-minded approach to creating curricula for vocational preparation leads to options that are esteemed by no one, neither students nor industry. Egalitarian policies pursued by governments often result in sectarian systems, with fruitless boundaries between educational institutions that in fact accentuate social divisions no less than other mechanisms of class distinction do that. The student body of course senses this, and if pecuniary and status benefits are not seen as outweighing the cost, they gradually tend to choose options with higher standing. Subsequent attempts to remedy the situation lead to academic drift out of the lower echelons of the HE system. Such drift may be allowed or initiated by the government, but is often launched by the institutions themselves. Though it counteracts the initial government measures, its effect will probably be largely in line with the original policy intentions (see e.g. Neave, 1983, pp. 269-270).

4.2 Two further agents: academics and the labour market

Students and politicians are by no means the only agents involved in changing higher education. What about the institutions themselves? What about the labour market? These latter agents are of course also influential in transforming the system. The thrust of the present thesis, however, is that the demands or aspirations of students comprise the variable which other actors are profoundly cognizant of and respond to when attempting to manipulate the system.

In regard to academia, two basic considerations seem to lie behind its responses. One is gradual alterations in the flow of students to each academic institution, whereby the institution is faced with an ever greater number of students and therefore endeavours to establish ever more elaborate and competitive selection procedures. Winning the competition for high-calibre students who want to earn respected credentials matters greatly for the image institutions want to project. They therefore feel it is paramount to impress on potential applicants the prestige of the institution and the respect conveyed by credentials earned there. Thus the institution stays extremely sensitive to what its current student body wants, as well as the possible students it wants to attract. The other basic consideration of academia is the ambitions of its personnel (Morphew, 2000), which are due to the drive of academics for status, or their longing for the working environment many of them became accustomed to in the rich research settings where they worked towards their PhD. Mentioning this here acknowledges it as a strong motivator for academic drift that does not derive its strength from the students at all, despite corresponding with the direction in which the aims of students also point. Nothing is new or remarkable about the influence of academics on their own institutions, and it is clear that they have long had considerable influence on the formation of the system in general.²⁴ A noteworthy example is that the drive for community colleges in the USA partly originated among the universities, which wanted to direct their ever growing attendance somewhere else.²⁵

Another agent playing a major role is the labour market, with its myriad of actors. Although this role is undeniable, the suggestion here is that the effects are mediated and operate through the institutions and the credentials they provide, whether this functions via the salary structure, which the market bases on credentials, or via the accreditation that labour unions or the state attaches to them. It is moreover conceivable that the salary structure builds to some extent on the same sort of reputation-related impressions that the students themselves follow.

²⁴ Cf. the influence of Clark Kerr, who was then president of the University of California, on the California Master Plan and his arguments for it (Kerr, 1994a, Chapter 8).

²⁵ Academics clearly had an effect on the general arguments for junior colleges and on the role that universities played in their establishment and development, not only during the latter part of the 19th century (Labaree, 1997, pp. 196-202), but also during the first part of the 20th century, see also (Breneman & Nelson, 1981, pp. 5-7).

5. A schematic presentation of the model

The status hierarchy within academia, first and foremost as perceived by the students but second as assessed by the faculty, is of course complex. My suggestion is however that the perceived relative status of credits from a specific programme at a certain educational level is largely determined by the access it offers to the job market and the access it provides to the next higher educational level, even though still further factors enter into consideration.²⁶ The relative importance of these varying directions of access is furthermore determined by the proportion of a cohort that goes on to the next higher schooling level. Thus a professional (or vocational) degree may carry more status, as evidenced by its attendance, until its academic counterpart gains the appearance of a more promising springboard into the next upper stage of the educational system. Such a balancing of prospects by students would account for the relative demise of vocational secondary education in comparison with academic secondary education in the Nordic countries (Jónasson, 2003) and within the European Union generally (A. Green et al., 1999), at a time when government and industry rhetoric (and perhaps the essential²⁷ interests of the students themselves) were still in favour of secondary tracks with a strong vocational basis.

The only approach for ranking academic programmes according to their status as perceived by the student body must in principle be empirical. Here we will however tentatively suggest a general ranking order, noting only post-compulsory programmes (meaning programmes at the secondary and tertiary levels). It should be noted that this ranking does not refer to institutional characteristics, even though it may to a large extent correspond to differences in them, but rather to the conceptual dimensions already discussed.

The scheme below should offer a conceptual tool for empirical research on the above questions, and is not intended to replace other classification systems, which have their own separate purposes (see a review in Huisman, 2000). This tool is primarily intended for studying the movements of individual institutions and the evolution within educational systems.²⁸

To begin with, the following hierarchy distinguishes six levels of educational institutions:²⁹

1. The first level (i.e. the lowest in the hierarchy now referred to) includes both secondary vocational programmes and secondary academic programmes. The distinction between the types of programmes lies primarily in the transfer values that the programmes have, which is to say that the academic programmes are more general, normally being more codified or declarative though not necessarily more liberally bent, and open up opportunities to select from a broader spectrum of venues at the next higher education level, whereas the vocational programmes are normally (though perhaps only slightly) of a more practical bent, meaning that they are less codified and more procedural, and open significantly fewer opportunities at the next level above, although normally some.

²⁶ It is of course unreasonable to suggest that the value attached to any one programme is universal. This does not hold for values in general and certainly not in regard to education. Instead, the discussion here refers to a general pattern and its statements refer to significant trends apparent for the population as a whole.

²⁷ I am here attempting to distinguish between “real” or confessed interest and pragmatic interest, i.e. the interest determining what course the student takes. Thus a student may admit that a certain vocation would be next to his or her heart but nevertheless decide to pursue an academic track in order to keep every future option open in view of general prospects and in view among other things of status.

²⁸ “System” here refers both to a strongly centralised system of educational institutions, such as exists in many European countries, and also to a community of educational institutions, such as exists in the USA.

²⁹ It should be clear that I am not attempting to replace any of the current institutional typologies.

2. At the second level, we have the one- or two-year programmes at the tertiary level which are definitely inferior to the official higher education degrees. In Europe these programmes are normally in the vocational category and not of the academic or liberal type, whereas they could be other type in Canada or the USA. This would correspond to the ISCED 4 level.

3. At the next level are vocational or technical programmes at the tertiary level (ISCED 5B) and academic first-level programmes, also at the tertiary level (ISCED 5A). It varies considerably by system whether such programmes grant proper university degrees or not.

4. The next or fourth level up comprises professional programmes at the second degree level, along with programmes ending in academic research degrees, normally master degrees in both cases. The ISCED scale does not yet differentiate any programmes at the sixth ISCED level.

5. The fifth and presently top level ends in the academic post-graduate degrees.³⁰ Note that this is not an ontological ranking, i.e. does not describe the order or purpose with which the levels came into existence. Rather, the ranking I hereby set forth describes the ranking of student preferences at the macro level, the order which is evident through student behaviour respecting these options. I suggest, however, that the ontological order has always been such that we first witness an academic version³¹ and later its vocational counterpart.³² The ISCED scale does not yet differentiate any programmes at the seventh ISCED level.

6. The post-doctoral level is slowly becoming a norm in various disciplines, and will soon gain the status of a proper level, the sixth level, topping this hierarchy. It should in the end also become differentiated across a vocational-academic dichotomy, in order to allow for a similar analysis. However, we have yet to gain experience at this level.

Table 1. A suggested ranking of degrees by students

Hierarchy	Educational level	Vocational / professional		Academic	
		A	A+	First	Later
1	Secondary	A	A+	A-	+
2	Tertiary non-university	B	B+	B-	+
3	University level (Bachelor)	C	C+	C-	+
4	University 2nd level (Master)	D	D+	D-	+
5	University 3rd level (PhD)	E	E+	E-	+
6	Post-doc	F	F+	F-	+

A simple numbering and ranking of this hierarchy is presented in Table 1. The alphabetic levels to the right designate the order in which the levels have in the course of time held the highest status among the student population. At one time, for example, the secondary degrees

³⁰ I have here included the professional third-level degrees, i.e. professional PhDs (Number 9), as these are becoming a reality. We should also be able to predict what will happen to the post-doc level.

³¹ Positioning the original liberal arts curriculum is somewhat problematic, as it originated largely as vocational (professional) preparation for an orator. Already in his *Republic* (especially Book VII), however, Plato clearly elaborates the vocational as well as the enlightening value of all higher disciplines. Since then this dichotomy has been clear (see also the last book of Aristotle's *Politics*).

³² It should be remembered, however, that the liberal curriculum of mediaeval and later times was integral to preparations for a profession; the curriculum did not on the whole maintain the purely educational value attributed to Aristoteles.

at Level A enjoyed the most popularity, with vocational credits being found most valuable. Then, as the higher education system expanded, the next level gained a higher status (B),³³ upon which the status of the previous level (A) shifted from + to -. The academic counterpart at the same time gained popularity at the expense of the vocational offering at the same level. Initially, the + category at any level remains intrinsically higher valued by the student population than the - category, but only until the next level above, which incidentally requires a theoretical and normally a somewhat more general educational background, achieves enough status to attract the student body at the lower level into the academic or general track. When a vocational programme has thus lost its appeal at one level, it is transferred up a level, where it regains its status and popularity for a while. This is likely to be a transitory phenomenon, with its academic counterpart at that level gradually gaining dominance. As the ranking in the table indicates, the general flow of student enrolment pursues the numerical order.

The academic programmes were historically already in place when the vocational programmes gradually came into existence (or gained status), roughly in the alphabetical order suggested. As a rule of thumb, each initially acquired a status reflected in enrolment figures that were higher than those of the corresponding academic level. Later, as the system continued to evolve, the academic programme at the same level gained the upper hand, earning it a + sign at that level. That forced the vocational programme at the next level upwards to take over the status occupied formerly by the vocational programme at the lower level. In this crisscross manner, the levels and two sides of the dichotomy repeatedly exchanged popularity and status, as the overall educational structure gradually lifted its ranks.

What complicates the picture (apart from the fact that its details may not fit every facet of any particular system) is that the academic components were frequently initiated as vocational programmes but gradually assumed an academic and sometimes even liberal character. Thus a drift also occurs across the dichotomy within each hierarchy of the table.

This outline is meant to illustrate how on the one hand the vocational and professional interests of students and on the other hand their aspirations for status or credentials work together to produce (or contribute substantially to) the dynamics and direction of academic drift that are consistently evidenced across cultures, at least in Western educational systems. My suggestion is that while a major portion of the student population seek vocational or professional degrees, they remain quite sensitive to the status of these degrees, basing their evaluation on a variety of general or fuzzy criteria. If an imbalance develops between the perceived status of a programme and its perceived vocational relevance, the student population gradually tends to opt for status rather than vocation (Jónasson, 2003) and thus migrates towards the more academically oriented degrees. Programmes, institutions and governments are in the long run sensitive to these imbalances, but in my analysis not so much directly as indirectly, i.e. they become conscious of the imbalance developing in student enrolments. They then act accordingly in their development strategies.

³³ Whether the tertiary non-university level plays a significant role or not varies from system to system. In some systems it is an important player, in others it hardly exists. It must be emphasised that this table is meant to convey a more or less universal perception, not to describe a specific system.

6. Predictions of the present model

I suggest that predictions of academic drift, as that phenomenon is further explicated by the credential model, can usefully be classified under three main headings (Jónasson, 2004b). Viewed from the credential standpoint, these headings are as follows:

- a) patterns in expansion trends that are common to varying HE systems
- b) significant discrepancies and correspondences between educational features (micro features) and features of overall system development (macro features)
- c) technical factors of expansion indicating its form and evolution.

Here I will concentrate on the first two types of predictions; for the type in c) consult (Jónasson, 2006).

6.1 The comparative aspect of the development of higher education

The applicability of both the academic drift and credential accounts to practical comparisons is particularly attractive, because these accounts call attention both to a universality and to dynamics not pinpointed by various other accounts. Nevertheless, it is imperative to tread carefully here, because even though other accounts may paint unjustifiably stark contrasts between nation states or cultures, the credential account also suggests at least mild cultural differences and differing development trajectories, as Archer (1979) has explained. These differences might however be no less rightfully attributed to socio-economic, ethnic or gender groups than to national education systems. Furthermore, not only explicit blueprint theories predicting global similarities (Meyer et al., 2005; Meyer, Ramirez, & Soysal, 1992) but also functional and Marxist accounts (see the review in Brown, 1995) may be so universal in their predictions as to detract from their usefulness.

Building on initial observation and previous considerations, I hypothesise that the credential account, by showing consideration for the substantial role played by academic drift, will suggest the following, here concentrating on the development of tertiary education:

1. Developmental trends at the macro level are largely independent of system factors, and hence should be similar for quite different systems of government or systems of HE. On the whole, one should thus find corresponding expansion patterns on the one hand in a very mixed and decentralised system of higher education, such as in the USA, and on the other hand in centralised systems such as those of many European countries, where development is to all appearances tightly controlled by the government. In a like manner, we will probably discover rather similar general growth characteristics whether we examine developed or developing countries.
2. The long-term overall growth coefficient remains quite stable over time because the macro features of the mechanism controlling growth (determined by the combined cultural and social capital being sought by the students) undergo little modification or none. There may however be substantial gender differences, also over the long-term. Calculations of the growth coefficient should include higher (tertiary) education, not just university education, or at least consider both (see Jónasson, 2006, for a more extensive set of predictions on related issues).
3. Although it may be possible to counter academic expansion in systems with exceptionally powerful government control,³⁴ any forced dampening of expanding

³⁴ This is a delicate point. Here the reference is to the university component of higher education and not to all of higher education. Government rhetoric seems to stimulate the growth of HE, but does normally not consider the high growth of academic higher education desirable, and with a variety of inconsistent actions governments

attendance rates at the top rungs of the ladder (i.e. in the universities or research universities) will probably result in a compensating academic drift, manifested as the slow, perhaps subtle upward drift of entire institutions (see below) or even of the system as a whole. Thus institutional drift will be more probable in centralised systems, and a more general (i.e. student) drift in decentralised systems. In this context, the difference between the university sector and the non-university sector becomes very important. If both are taken together, the growth will seem to be smooth and stable in every system, which can conceal part of the activity. In a strongly centralised system, considering the growth of the university sector separately will reveal this evolution as occurring in a series of distinct steps, with “corrections” to the system in terms of institutional upgrading happening abruptly and intermittently.

4. In centralised systems one would also naturally expect drifting from a university-dominated to a dual system and through a binary to a unitary system, applying the stage concept (Neave, 1983) with eventually four stages (Scott, 1995). Throughout this hierarchy, additions to the system from below will result in a spiral progression, with the system in a sense repeating itself.
5. This reinforces the presumption that development will occur in similar general patterns that are not occasioned or directed by such institutional blueprints as a common model (e.g. the Humboldtian model or the Bologna process) or a common rhetoric (e.g. the human capital theory). This does not negate the influence of such institutional copying, but it will not be the driving force. Kindred patterns of development do not necessarily imply any explicit lateral influence between systems,³⁵ which means that we can have universal characteristics that have not originated through global repercussions or spreading. While they occur everywhere, this is not due to any lateral global mechanism.
6. Irrespective of the degree of central control, innovation will take place most frequently at lower levels of the system. As regards institutional initiatives by the government,³⁶ they will normally be directed at the non-university side of the dichotomy, no matter whether these initiatives are substantial or minimal nor whether they are based on functional or egalitarian³⁷ arguments. The resulting institutions will subsequently tend to drift towards levels of higher prestige, sometimes against government policy but sometimes actually supported by it.
7. As the credential nature of education becomes more transparent, the incentive of for-profit agencies to participate in the educational market will become stronger, as has already been noticed in Europe, Canada and the USA (Skolnik, 2005, pp. 58-59).

6.2 Discrepancies between macro and micro developments

The perspective presented in this paper is a bird’s-eye view of educational expansion which proposes credentialism as a chief causal factor. This overall viewpoint is conducive to perceiving the macro changes suggested above (see also Jónasson, 1997, 2003), though they may indeed lead to important internal developments of micro dimensions, which thus devolve from the macro changes rather than the opposite and rather than what is normally thought to be the case. The outstanding force behind overall HE expansion is a relentless striving for credentials (and status), which either triggers or stimulates particular developments in the education system. This is the source of student body influence on the institutions, since the

attempt to temper it.

³⁵ This is such a common assumption (often taken to be self-evident) that it may require a more detailed explanation.

³⁶ Governments may want to strengthen the high-prestige, research-intensive institutions, but this is normally done by channelling more money into research rather than by institutional manipulation.

³⁷ These egalitarian arguments may refer to socio-economic groups, ethnic groups or even be part of a regional policy, or may of course be based on a combination of all these.

institutions comply with the general direction in which the student body wants to head. Furthermore, as pointed out above, there is also a strong internal mechanism within educational institutions that urges them in the same direction anyhow. Its relationship to students is one more instance which negates the notion that first governments and institutions decide what the system should be like and students then comply. The dynamics of change are much more interactive.

What is subsequently perhaps most interesting is that government rhetoric ostensibly emphasises egalitarian principles as well as human capital and the functional operation of the system (the efficiency argument). Much centralised intervention is purportedly along those lines. Governments claim that they emphasise vocational and professional education, that they support a close relationship with industry and that they want to support both research and teaching on the grounds that these ultimately stimulate the economy (Wolf, 2002). In the USA (Ehrenberg, 2005) and Canada (Laidler, 2005), the emphasis that was in the past given solely to vocational and professional education has now gradually undergone a clear shift to include also results-oriented research, at least as far as the functional part of the argument goes. What we are witnessing is therefore a familiar rhetoric repeating itself but applied to a higher rung of the educational ladder.

Moreover, the functional view also prevails within the student body, so long as it does not conflict too dramatically with the students' yearning for status.³⁸ Thus vocational and professional subjects will be preferred to the more academic ones, but only as long as the former retain a high enough status, that is, as long as their value in the culture is on a par with that of the more academic courses. Thus we will observe a balancing act between forces that are purely functional and those aiming at the status-impregnated cultural capital which is conferred by academic degrees. Cognizant of this situation, I suggest a further hypothesis, as follows:

8. The student body will continue expanding, above all in consequence of the credential mechanism. Growth in absolute terms at each level (technical, bachelor, master, doctoral) will be slow but steady in the initial stages, and at the outset the professional, technical, i.e. job-related, streams at that level will show the most pronounced expansion. Gradually, nonetheless, the growth of these will lose momentum, compared to more academic streams which will overtake them bit by bit. Academic drift (within every category, as discussed above) will be an appropriate term for describing this change, which will partly be driven by credentialism. Seen in this light, the initial expansion of ostensibly technical or professional schools (particularly those which have recently been upgraded within the system) will in fact be no evidence against the account of academic drift but rather a natural first stage in the long-term process of that drift. As the foreseeable future unfolds, the relative strength of any professional subject will progressively diminish. Its weakening may, however, be countered by the dissociation of mission and content, as suggested by Labaree (2006), with only the content drifting to academia.
9. As a vocational programme (normally a whole institution) loses its relative standing at one level, it will shift upwards or re-establish itself at a higher level, directly competing with the academic programme already in place at that level. This has happened repeatedly in European settings. Thus we note the *professional* bachelor, master and doctor (and perhaps gradually the post-doctor) competing for a while with their academic counterparts, and even keeping the upper hand for quite some time.³⁹ As the present

³⁸ See detailed discussion by Labaree (1997, pp. 40-41).

³⁹ I am here using the term "professional" descriptively; although it is not normally used to classify bachelor degrees, it is however often applied to master and occasionally to doctoral degrees.

analysis has indicated, however, this is a transitory phenomenon (even if it takes several decades).⁴⁰

10. The continued prospering of academically high-status institutions and programmes will be tempered in relative terms by the academic drift of vocational and professional institutions (i.e. institutional drift, or the first category in my outline of such drift). The mechanism of this will be that in order to minimise the loss of status-seeking students into more academic institutions and programmes, lower-status institutions will seek to enhance their standing within the system by elevating their programmes to a more esteemed level. Such institutions will actually be aided in this move by the government, based on its functional rhetoric. This will happen irrespective of whether up-skilling occurs in the relevant jobs, even though it may coincide with such a development.
11. The job market will elevate its requirements for credentials, even though no objective assessment has shown a need for doing so. To some extent this development will be a simple response to the change in worker supply. In this manner the employment sector will be an active partner, albeit a probably unwilling or unsuspecting one, to the credential spiral and thus to academic drift.
12. Despite the functional overtones of government rhetoric, the quality battery will emphasise mostly formal competencies, coinciding with the academic overtones of the credential mechanism. No party will receive specific coherent guidance to the contrary from such stakeholders as industry, so the revisions will not least be driven by high-status institutions which are afraid of losing relative status and are attempting to retain it. In the fight that governments may think they are waging against credentialism, perhaps even in an effort to dampen social stratification, they will adopt remedies that as a rule actually nurture credentialism, partly since they will apply traditional evaluation mechanisms.⁴¹
13. Upon seeking guidelines from industry, higher education will obtain less substantial, constructive and practical advice than anticipated, because in reality the attitude of industry is and will be based on credentials, which notably have more to do with the prestige of accrediting institutions than with job skills.

For a corresponding hypothesis on the technical side of HE according to the present model, see (Jónasson, 2006).

This paper has argued that students, propelled by credential aspirations that combine the goals of seeking job security, keeping options open for further education, and maintaining or improving social status, are powerful drivers of educational system development. This force, coupled with government efforts to ensure equality and efficiency and with the institutions' own desire for status, can be used to propose the systemic evolution recounted above.

In line with the analysis of Labaree (2006), the appearance or scope of HE sometimes and at least temporarily becomes more professionally or vocationally oriented, as inspired or even demanded by external forces, i.e. the students and the government or funding agencies and industry (to the extent that it is an agent in this situation). The internal workings of the system, on the other hand, along with its content at the programme, institution and system levels, become more academic (general or theoretical), urged on by the demands of academia, but also, as paradoxical as that may seem, by governmental support.

Such an argument, built substantially on the credential aspirations of the student population and the kindred forces from within academia, or among the HE faculty, can be used to predict

⁴⁰ Labaree (2006) has argued how the professional programmes may survive for a long time through retaining their functional appearance on the outside but at the same time shifting their ground on the inside, maintaining their status within the academic hierarchy by making their content more academic.

⁴¹ A value judgment on my behalf should not be inferred from this account. I have not indicated whether academic drift is good or bad, just that it occurs, and have suggested how and why.

the gradual convergence of higher education at the programme, institution and system levels, despite frequent policy initiatives to the contrary and despite general praise for diversity. Thus academic drift and the resulting system convergence are caused by the desires for upward social mobility evidenced among both students and institutions and reluctantly supported by governments. While governments may feel deep down that this runs against their better judgment, they concede in these developments, perhaps accepting that their official judgment could be ill-advised.

In addition, this argument can be used to defend some of the policy initiatives that lead to convergence at all levels. The present paper has provided a broader basis for such a defence by describing in some detail how academic drift, mainly due to credentialism, is characterised by the gradual migration of vocational programmes from secondary level to the polytechnic, bachelor and master levels and then as far onwards as the professional doctoral levels. During this movement, the programmes continuously strive to retain their vocational and overall significance by means of status enhancement.

Thus an affirmative answer must be given to the question posed in the title, i.e., credentialism can be applied to predict the convergence of institutions and systems of higher education.

7. References

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