I began my career in higher education on January 1, 1980. I worked in the admissions office at Queen’s University Belfast, where I helped process the thousands of applications for undergraduate admission that were received and processed through the Universities Central Council on Admissions (UCCA). UCCA served as a clearinghouse for undergraduate applications in the United Kingdom from 1961 until its merger with Polytechnics Central Admissions Service (PCAS), to form the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), in 1993.

In the subsequent 36 years, I worked at eight universities in the United Kingdom and overseas and experienced a wide range of higher education environments of various sizes, missions, and cultures. Without doubt, the single greatest change in U.K. higher education during this time was from a selective to a mass system. Enormous growth ensued: the number of students obtaining an undergraduate degree in the UK increased almost sixfold, from approximately 68,000 in 1980 (House of Commons Library, 2012) to more than 400,000 in 2014 (HESA 2015).

Now, in semi-retirement, I have had time to reflect on some of the key aspects of my career in higher education. I hope these personal reflections on my own experience and on higher education more generally will provide some insight into how some aspects of higher education in the United Kingdom have developed. I count myself privileged to have experienced a wide range of institutions in all of the U.K. university mission groups and in a range of positions extending from junior administrative officer to academic registrar and, finally, to university registrar and secretary.

The traditional prerequisites for being a successful registrar—including governance, leadership, and a forensic understanding of systems and processes (and the technology that supports these)—not to mention political acumen—are well known. However, in this article I will focus on one critical area that sometimes is overlooked: the ability to understand and use key data at both the operational and the strategic level. I believe this to be one of the “bread and butter” elements of being a successful registrar. Indeed, analyzing and interpreting data is one of the core proficiencies cited in the Report of the AACRAO Professional Competencies and Proficiencies Working Group (AACRAO 2015).

The facts that I’d been a mathematics teacher for three years prior to starting my career in higher education and that my bachelor’s degree is in aeronautical engineering meant that I was comfortable generating, assuring, and manipulating data in my new profession. Although this paper presents a U.K. perspective, I believe that my ob-
servations and comments apply in the United States, too, particularly with regard to the role and status of registrars within their universities.

It is worth noting that the nearest equivalent to a U.S. registrar in the United Kingdom is an academic registrar, who typically reports to a university registrar/secretary who, in turn, reports to the vice-chancellor (president). For the purposes of this paper, the terms “registrar” and “academic registrar” are interchangeable.

**CONTEXT**

In today’s rapidly changing higher education environment, the requirements of a wide range of internal and external stakeholders are arguably more demanding than ever before. For example, since 1998, the U.K.’s tuition fees increased from zero (fully funded by government) to £9,000 (approximately US$14,000 funded by students) in England and Wales in 2012. Arrangements differ for students on undergraduate courses in Northern Ireland and Scotland, where tuition fees are much less: £3,925 (approximately US$6,000) in Northern Ireland and free to local students in Scotland. That said, the reality today for the majority of U.K. students is that a typical three-year, full-time undergraduate degree program will cost them a total of £27,000 (approximately US$41,000) in tuition fees or well over £50,000 (approximately US$76,000) when accommodation, food, and living costs are included. Students can access government loans through the Student Loan Company (SLC); students eventually pay off the loans as an additional tax whenever their annual salary reaches £21,000 (US$32,000). As a condition of charging the £9,000 maximum for tuition fees, institutions have had to provide a wide range of scholarships and bursaries to suitably qualified students to offset tuition fees.

Nevertheless, the introduction of the £9,000 tuition fee represents a significant change in the financial situation of graduating students in a little more than ten years. (See Table 1 for a summary of the changes in the financial arrangements for higher education students in the United Kingdom since 1962.)

A further development in early 2015 was the U.K.’s Competition and Markets Authority’s (CMA) advice to universities that it “will monitor the sector and commence a review in October 2015 to assess compliance with consumer law” (CMA advice to higher education providers, March 2015). This has significant implications for universities that had argued that the student/institution relationship was not a simple consumer/provider relationship and, consequently, was beyond the scope of consumer law. Clearly, this no longer obtains.

**GROWTH IN DEMAND FOR DATA FROM EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS**

In the United Kingdom, the initial focus on data was to enable institutions to respond to the growing demands of external stakeholders—including the various funding bodies (public and private) and the major statistical bodies, such as the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), which has been gathering a wide range of student-related data since 1993, and its antecedent bodies.

In 1996–97, on behalf of all the U.K. funding bodies, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)
used the student, financial, and staffing data collected annually by HESA to publish the first set of U.K. performance indicators. (HESA itself took on this responsibility in 2002–03.)

U.K. higher education performance indicators (PIs) are a range of statistical indicators intended to offer an objective measure of how an institution is performing. They currently include:

- widening participation indicators;
- non-continuation rates (including projected outcomes);
- module (discrete course element) completion rates;
- research output; and
- employment of graduates.

The stated purpose of the HESA PIs is to:

- provide reliable information on the nature and performance of the U.K. higher education sector;
- allow comparison between individual higher education providers of a similar nature, where appropriate;
- enable higher education providers to benchmark their own performance;
- inform policy developments; and
- contribute to the public accountability of higher education.

The expectation is that these PIs would be of interest to a wide range of bodies, including government, universities and colleges, and U.K. higher education funding bodies. The indicators also are considered to be relevant to schools, prospective students, and employers. This annual exercise has grown in breadth and complexity since its inception and now requires significant input from a wide range of other administrative areas, including finance and human resources.

In addition, since 1983, there have been increasing demands by government for data to assure the quality and standard of teaching in U.K. higher education; this is undertaken currently by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). Institutions require a successful outcome from their QAA quinquennial reviews to be able to continue to award degrees. In addition, the squeeze on U.K. public finances has reinforced the government’s desire to see value for money in higher education not only for government but also, increasingly, for students. This has led to very specific key national measures of institutional performance, including the National Student Survey (NSS) and the Destination of Leavers in Higher Education (DLHE).

The NSS is an annual survey in response to which final-year undergraduate students answer a series of questions addressing teaching, assessment and feedback, academic support, organization and management, learning re-

### Table 2.

**NSS National Outcomes, 2014 and 2015 (HEFCE 2015)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Satisfied (%)*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1–4</td>
<td>The teaching on my course</td>
<td>87 87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5–8</td>
<td>Assessment and feedback</td>
<td>72 73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9–12</td>
<td>Academic support</td>
<td>81 82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13–15</td>
<td>Organization and management</td>
<td>78 79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16–18</td>
<td>Learning resources</td>
<td>85 86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19–21</td>
<td>Personal development</td>
<td>82 83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Overall satisfaction</td>
<td>86 86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The percentage satisfied is calculated by combining the “strongly agree” and “mostly agree” responses.
sources, personal development, and overall satisfaction. The DLHE return is an annual survey approximately six months after students leave and includes the type of employment entered or what sort of further study may be engaged in (where relevant).

To further complicate data-gathering matters, since 1999, the United Kingdom has been transformed by devolution, a process of decentralizing government and giving more powers to the four nations of which it is comprised: England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. This has resulted in changes in the data gathered to reflect the respective priorities of these devolved authorities.

A further dimension of data gathering and reporting that is proving critical to U.K. institutions was the introduction, in 2009, of the government’s new student Tier 4 visas as part of its Points Based System for Immigration (PBS). This required higher education institutions (HEIs) that wished to recruit students from outside the European Union (EU) to apply for and then maintain a license to sponsor such students. The legal framework for PBS and its reporting arrangements have become even more complex and burdensome since its initial introduction. However, the risks associated with failing to comply are enormous:

The loss of a Tier 4 license by a medium-sized university with, say, 1,000 non-EU students could mean a loss of more than £10 million (US$15 million) per year for a minimum of two years (assuming that a new license was granted).

Tier 4 compliance is particularly fraught because the obligations and requirements keep changing (at least twice a year), and the guidance provided by the U.K. Home Office and the U.K. Visa and Immigration Service (UKVI) can be at odds with current immigration legislation as articulated in “Immigration Rules.” Many U.K. universities have ambitious recruitment targets for non-EU students to offset shortfalls in government funding. (See Figure 1, which shows the growth in this recruitment between 2004–05 and 2014–15.) There is some evidence that the government’s current immigration policy has deterred non-EU students who otherwise would have come to the United Kingdom to study.

**INTERNAL STAKEHOLDER DEMAND FOR DATA**

Whereas the major internal requirements for institutional data initially were finance driven, the growing demands of external stakeholders are mirrored now in increasingly complex internal demands for data. (This is usually to

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**FIGURE 1. Growth in Non-EU Student Enrollment Between 2004–05 and 2014–15**

[Graph showing growth in non-EU student enrollment from 2004-05 to 2014-15]
gain some insight into the potential outcome of the various national data-gathering exercises before the results are published.) This approach is still critical to institutions for obvious reasons (i.e., to avoid unpleasant surprises from published national data), but other drivers have also increased internal demand for data.

The financial modeling of student data has always been an important requirement as institutions tried to predict tuition fee income year on year (for many institutions, this was the largest single source of income). As mentioned previously, the recruitment of students to U.K. full-time undergraduate courses is processed through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service. UCAS limits the maximum number of applications a single applicant can submit to five and imposes a strict timetable that runs from September, the earliest date that an application can be made, through to the following August and the release of national examination results. The normal application process ends in mid-January, and applicants should have received offers from institutions by the end of March. By early May, applicants are required to have accepted a maximum of two offers: a firm choice and an “insurance” choice to be used in the event their final grades are insufficient for their firm choice. This creates more certainty for students and institutions, even though there is a significant degree of volatility later in the cycle when students who have not met the requirements of their respective offers enter a “clearing” process that extends from mid-August until immediately prior to courses starting in September/October. The vast majority of U.K. undergraduate programs start in September/October and run through May/June of the following year for three years.

As in the United States, U.K. institutions model their student enrollment, retention, and withdrawals (though there is nothing in the United Kingdom that is comparable to strategic enrollment management—SEM—in the United States). Developing a dialogue around recruitment and retention—acknowledging that poor retention is bad for students and bad for institutions, too—is the closest the United Kingdom gets to SEM. In contrast, SEM is a mature concept in the United States, where it is supported by a rich research literature and events such as AACRAO’s annual SEM meeting. These are just some of the many ways in which SEM professionals can keep current with developments in the field and share ideas. In the United Kingdom, the major effort (apart from the key statistical and other returns) has been to process data as part of the quality assurance cycle. In most cases, these data are at the individual degree program level and also at the module (program component) level. Some academic departments are much better at this than others; this can skew institutional data unless there is appropriate institutional oversight.

Initially, these and other modeling data were rarely aggregated other than to provide an institutional perspective—again as part of the quality assurance processes. Indeed, institutions would have struggled to match their modeling data with those produced for quality assurance processes. One of the reasons for this is understandable: At the degree program and module levels, there was pressure to keep the number of students (the denominator) as low as possible (by excluding early withdrawals) in order to optimize/maximize progression and completion statistics. The lack of real integration of institutional data meant that there was no single view of such data; instead, there were several views reflecting the various stakeholder requirements. However, as public funding decreased and demands for public accountability increased, institutions recognized the need for a single corporate perspective on data.

One other interesting aspect of U.K. higher education is the concept of a “market”; indeed, the notion of a true market in U.K. higher education would not withstand much scrutiny. In the first instance, there are the limitations of the UCAS clearinghouse system for full-time undergraduate applications. Then there is the cap on tuition fees, which, when it was introduced, was considered by the government to be a real upper limit. In fact, the vast majority of universities chose to charge the £9,000 maximum tuition fee. Finally, until very recently, there was a national cap on the total number of students entering higher education—a cap that was reflected in individual recruitment caps for each institution. These were accompanied by draconian financial penalties if the caps were exceeded. The government’s removal of student number controls in 2015 left institutions free to determine the level at which they should recruit. This will bring the United Kingdom closer to a real higher education market than it has ever been before.

I have been concerned since the introduction of the £9,000 tuition fee that U.K. students will look outside the nation’s borders for their higher education. There is some evidence of this already: A recent BBC headline read, “U.K.
student numbers surge in Netherlands” and added, “Across the Netherlands, there are 2,600 U.K. students in universities this term—up by a third in a year. And independent school head teachers want Dutch universities to be included in the UCAS application form” (BBC 2015). This trend is likely to grow, especially with the prospect of increases to the current level of tuition fees. In his 2015 budget statement, the chancellor of the exchequer said the government “will allow institutions offering high teaching quality to increase their tuition fees in line with inflation from 2017–18” (U.K. Summer Budget Statement 2015, para 2.204).

ORGANIZATIONAL CHALLENGES

Over the years I have witnessed major organizational changes not only in the institutions where I have worked but also across the whole U.K. higher education sector. One particular aspect of change has been the growth of “specialisms” to address the complexities resulting from external stakeholders’ ever-increasing demands for data/information. Of course, at one level, this makes good sense; there is a need to focus effort in order to ensure that the relevant detail is being dealt with appropriately. However, one unhelpful outcome has been an occasional failure to create routine, effective communication between these specialisms and the more traditional parts of the institutional infrastructure. Indeed, some of the specialisms become so complex themselves that communication problems arise within them. When there is a need to move toward a more integrated approach to data, the existence of these specialisms can present significant challenges, particularly when debates about “whose data?” arise.

Working with the various specialisms to provide data to a wide range of demanding stakeholders requires an enormous degree of tenacity, not least to ensure data quality so that comparative data are truly meaningful. This is a key role for the registrar and means not just being on top of the data but working with key individuals across the university to ensure corporate understanding (as opposed to a narrow specialism focus) and ownership of the data. Each of us bears responsibility for the ownership of institutional data.

WHERE DOES THE REGISTRAR FIT IN?

Registrars have played and will continue to play a key role in their respective institutions in the United Kingdom and in the United States. I agree wholeheartedly with Sauer and Shanken’s (2015) perception of the registrar “as a ‘connector position,’ a key professional whose overarching purpose is ‘connecting the dots’ between institutional functions and organizational divisions.” They articulate in detail the SEM-related, legal, knowledge management, and leadership roles of the registrar (AACRAO 2015). I would argue that no other individual in a university enjoys the registrar’s unique position as an essential conduit between students and virtually every aspect of their interaction with their institutions. This key role transcends the operational (e.g., gathering, assuring, and processing data) and stretches well into the strategic realms of institutional endeavor by, for example, enabling a holistic, corporate perspective on the student/institutional interaction. The transformational impact of using data successfully to generate information, to acquire knowledge, and, finally, to help institutions acquire wisdom and genuine insights into the relationship between them and their students is obvious. This, surely, is crucial to creating a framework for long-term institutional sustainability in a volatile higher education environment.

There are real opportunities here for data-savvy registrars and academic registrars to make this critical contribution to institutional effectiveness using, as a starting point, the student-related data they understand so well. This way we can move from what at times can appear to be a “data rich – information poor” environment to one where the true value of corporate data is understood and exploited to its full extent to the benefit of external stakeholders, the institution, and, most important, our students.

THE USE OF DATA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

There will always be a need in higher education to satisfy the demands of external stakeholders; it is unlikely that these demands will ease over time. Indeed, if the United Kingdom is anything to judge by, things will become ever more challenging. The recent governmental focus on student outcomes (i.e., retention and completion) in the United Kingdom and in the United States provides a clear indication of current policy priorities. Higher education needs to be able to respond to this—and, just as important, to be seen to respond to it.

Much of the research literature associated with student retention and success has focused on the analysis of student performance as a function of a range of factors,
including academic achievement prior to university, curriculum design and delivery, and social and cultural diversity. Institutions have been able to use their student data on the performance of current or previous cohorts and similar analyses to try to predict which future cohorts of students might be at risk of failure and/or non-progression or -completion. Once this is done, intervention strategies can be developed to improve the chances of success of students who might be at risk.

A major drawback of this approach is that it is “post hoc,” requiring the second guessing of which groups of students might be at risk in the future. At one institution, I produced a hefty annual tome that analyzed the previous year’s cohorts of students’ performance against a wide range of variables and included detailed internal and external comparisons. Although this helped the institution to prepare and/or adapt intervention strategies for incoming cohorts of students, it did little to help those from the previous year whose performance was being reviewed.

A key requirement is the acquisition of timely information about students who may be at risk such that there is time to apply relevant intervention strategies in order to enhance the chances of student success. This way it would be possible to reduce the time it takes some students to complete their studies and, even more important—and from a national perspective—it could reduce the likelihood of losing students from higher education altogether.

The advent of 21st-century analytic tools means that it is possible to do this in real time based not only on the traditional measure of academic performance but also on a wide range of physical and virtual engagement measures, including presence in class, access to the library and learning management systems, as well as a wide range of extra-curricular activities. This particular focus on student success provides another opportunity for the registrar to display “big picture” credentials by connecting key teaching and advising staff with real-time information about students.

**CONCLUSION**

A great deal has changed in higher education over the past 35 years; in many respects, the only constant has been change itself. Notwithstanding these changes, I have never been clearer in my own mind about the responsibilities our universities have for their students and their ultimate success in higher education. Higher education is not a commodity, and we should stop treating it as if it were. Hunter Rawlings, president of the Association of American Universities and former president of Cornell University and the University of Iowa, is quite right when he says that “college is not a commodity. It’s a challenging engagement in which both parties have to take an active and risk-taking role if its potential value is to be realized” (Washington Post 2016).

If this endeavor is to be of value, then both parties need to participate. This means a level of engagement between the parties that at times may seem almost impossible given the physical, social, and/or cultural distance between them. One way this gap can be narrowed is by knowing more about each other. Again, it’s the “data/information/ knowledge/wisdom thing.” Who better to take a lead in this than the registrar?

**REFERENCES**


**About the Author**

**PHILIP HENRY** is a semi-retired former U.K. Registrar and Secretary with more than 36 years’ experience in higher education. He has been active in staff development in the United Kingdom (Association of University Administrators, Academic Registrars Council, and Association of Heads of University Administration), in the United States (AACRAO and a number of state and regional associations), and in Canada (Association of Registrars of the Universities and Colleges of Canada). Passionate about ensuring that students get the very best experience possible at their institutions, he advises universities and software companies in this regard.