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British Politics and Higher Education

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By [Nigel Thrift](#)

It is a very odd time in British higher education, as it is in higher education in many other countries (except those like Ireland which are already besieged). We know that big cuts in university budgets are coming, but we don't know precisely what they are.

This is not to say that we know nothing: selective leaks to the press mean that we can already be sure about some of what is going to happen in England at least. There will be big cuts to the core government teaching grant and research.

But what is fascinating about the situation is what it shows about the political process more generally. The government is intent on the charged process of making cuts, and it is understandable that this is taking up a lot of their attention. But that means that what comes after is still only known through a glass darkly. What will be particularly interesting will be how the situation plays out politically. Let me provide just a few examples from the U.K.

Some ministers have talked tough about letting universities fail that happen on hard times under the new funding regime. But will they really be able to carry through on this? There will be situations where local government MPs may well fight hard to keep their local university. Each fight will bring its own share of political problems. But the usual mechanism of quietly merging the failing institution with another that is still functioning is unlikely to be available since the funds to grease the wheels of a merger will be all but non-existent.

Similarly, we are going to move into a market in higher education. As all those involved in the study of markets know too well, markets have to be constructed. They don't just happen. But there are precious few genuine market mechanisms in British higher education, with the accompanying plethora of rules and regulations that both surround and constitute them, except in the case of overseas students. This is another political problem because constructing markets is a necessarily political process arising out of conflict and compromise.

Then there is the issue of new private-sector players. How will they fit in to what is foreseen? Ministers have talked about the private sector taking over some universities, but I suspect that these operations can only be made profitable by running down wage costs in ways which are hardly going to be welcomed by the unions and could again cause disruption. Another political problem.

Finally, there is the issue of satisfying lobby groups. Ministers have received visits from a succession of affected institutions and university groups pleading their particular case. Balancing competing interests is never easy and in times of change it becomes particularly problematic. Indeed, it often requires the judgment – and guile – of Solomon.

So when we finally hear the news of what the cuts will be in the U.K. or elsewhere it is worth remembering that this will be just the beginning of a long drawn-out process in which politics will be crucial and ever-present.

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