

Collegiate Academic Structures in Scotland and the United States: A Comparative Analysis

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Introduction

To understand the differences between higher education academic structures is to create a synergistic experience that benefits both structures involved. In a recent trip to Scotland to study the higher education structures, I was able to compare the structure of academic programs at the graduate and undergraduate levels to those of colleges and universities in the United States. I will discuss these differences, which create such a synergism, in the following paper. First, I will outline the differences in two and four year institutions both in the United States and their respective counterparts in Scotland. Second, I will discuss the divisions of academic units by comparing United States institutional structures against the Scottish. Third, I will chart the structure of undergraduate and graduate academic programs, inclusive of the typical process that students at all levels go through their degree. Finally, I will discuss the difference between the higher education systems in the United States and Scotland to establish which methods, if any, employed in Scotland could be beneficial to the United States higher education system.

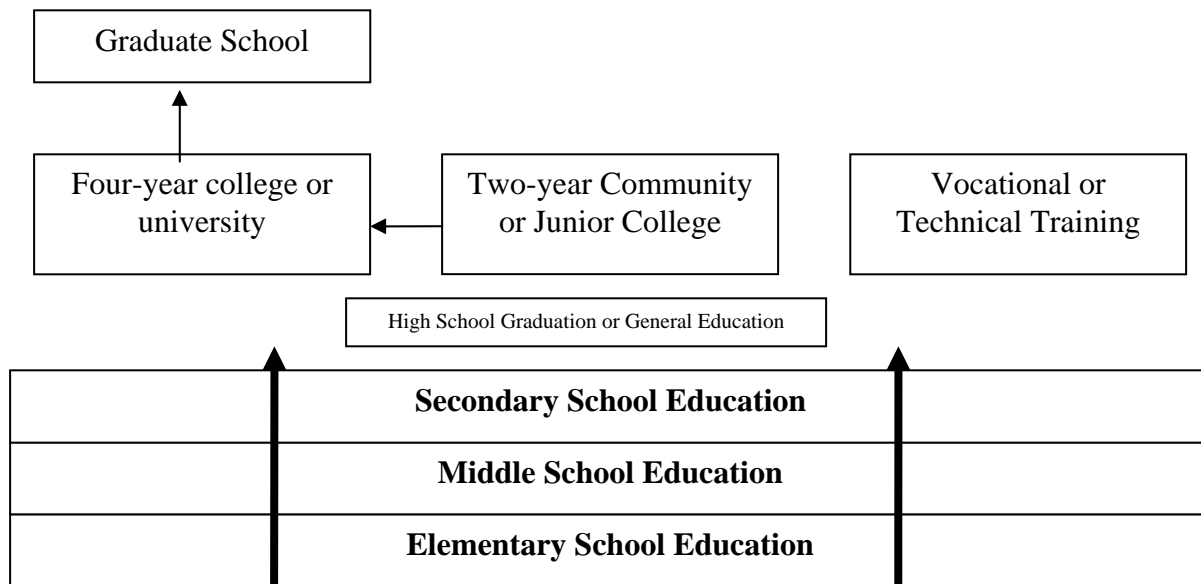
Structure of Two and Four Year Institutions

Colleges and universities in the United States are typically divided into two-year community colleges or junior colleges and four-year colleges or universities. The two-year colleges provide vocational or technical training that leads to an Associate of Science (A.S.) or an Associate of Arts (A.A.) award, which are the highest degrees awarded, at the end of the two years. They also provide continual education for those who wish to participate in lifelong learning or change careers. Additionally, they are used as middle points for high school graduates who may have not had the grades to enter a four-year college or university, but who wish to continue on to further their education and potentially enter a university. The education received at a community or junior college is sometimes remedial and provides the basic requirements necessary to move forward in a collegiate career. Further differentiation can be made between community or junior colleges by the type of education that they provide.

In the United States, community colleges may also be non-profit vocational colleges. These colleges provide training in service careers such as welding, furniture making, and baking. Additionally, there are for-profit schools such as DeVry University which provide more vocational training at an advanced level based on the student's interest. A student may pursue an A.S. in technical design and become fluent in programs such as AutoCAD. The for-profit universities typically provide more choice for the students in terms of what they want to earn from their degree program, whereas the traditional non-profit vocational schools have fixed curriculum with elective choices for the students to complete their degree. Students may sometimes move from these vocational schools to four-year institutions; however, it is

uncommon as they provide no theoretical majors for students. A student would often need to start their education over (LA Trade Tech, 2006).

Four-year colleges and universities, in the United States, provide more liberal arts based degrees, which are more theoretical and research oriented; or, they offer high-level applied degrees such as engineering and business. Training in these institutions can lead to, at the undergraduate level, Bachelor of Arts (B.A.), Bachelor of Science (B.S.), or Bachelor of Music (B.M.) degrees, and at the graduate level, a variety of degrees ranging from Master of Science (M.S.) to Master of Education (M.Ed.) to Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degrees. This list is not inclusive of all potential degrees that may be earned. It is meant to show examples of potential degrees that may be earned. The education here is usually in one or two specific fields depending on the degree and in a particular university division such as a School of Letters, Arts, and Sciences. The following diagram shows the process in the American education system.



Not unlike the United States, Scottish higher education is divided up into two levels. The first level is called *further education* and the second, *higher education* (Profiles, 2005). The further education level is equivalent to community college in the United States. Student who choose this track go into professions of a vocational nature such as cosmetology. Students who pursue further education may also move into higher education after completing courses that allow them to enter higher education.

At the higher education level in Scotland, students train in two distinct environments. The first of these are the community-based schools such as Napier University or Glasgow Caledonian that provide high-level applied degrees such as business, engineering, and nursing. The second of these schools are the ancient universities such as the University of St. Andrews or the University of Edinburgh, which provide theoretical based programs in medicine, law, sciences, and arts and humanities. Here, degrees equivalent to the American Bachelor of Arts, Master of Arts, and Doctor of Philosophy may be earned.

The Academic Structure of an Undergraduate Degree

In the United States, both at the community college and university level, degrees are set up based on requirements for a general education and specific courses for an area of emphasis. For example, if a student were to pursue an Associate of Arts degree in French, they would take courses in basic French as well as general education requirements. After completion of the Associate of Arts degree, the student can pursue their course further at a four-year university with a major in French. Here, the student would complete more courses in their intended major as well as more general education requirements.

In Scotland, the same principal applies. However, depending on the degree at the further education level, the student may not be allowed to continue on to university. For example, if the student was to pursue a degree in beauty therapy, this would be a terminal degree at the further education level. However, if the student was to choose a degree such as international tourism management, there is the possibility of the student moving to a university education after completing their basic requirements at a further education school.

A further difference between Scotland and the United Kingdom, as compared to the United States is that Scotland provides 4- or 5-year higher education programs. In the rest of the United Kingdom, higher education programs are limited to 3 years of study. For example, if a student in Scotland was studying a foreign language, they would have 5 years of higher education to develop their proficiency in the language of their choice (John Alexander, personal communication, 07/18/2006). This would also include an intensive study abroad experience in the home country of their language. A chemistry degree would consist of 4 years of study at a university with intensive research experiments in the third and fourth year. In other UK universities, both courses are limited to 3 years of pure coursework in the desired field.

The Academic Structure of a Graduate or Postgraduate Degree

Graduate or Postgraduate degrees in Scotland and the United States are similar in that they are both research based degrees. The difference comes in how the programs are broken down by taught master's or doctoral degrees versus research master's or doctoral degrees in Scotland. A taught master's degree would be the equivalent of a course-based degree in the United States. For example, in my Master's of Education program, we have 33 units of coursework and 8 units of practicum and seminar capstone courses. In Scotland, this would be equivalent to the taught degree program because no thesis or research component drives the completion of the degree.

Research Master's degrees, in Scotland, are based solely on defining a research project at the beginning of the admittance and working with faculty to complete said project. This method requires no formal coursework requirement and is often extremely independent. There is the possibility of taking coursework during the program to enhance your learning and research, but it is not required.

In Scotland, at the doctoral level, this difference between taught and research degrees exists also. For example, a student could pursue a Doctor of Education degree which is classified as a taught doctoral degree. However, the student could also pursue a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Education which is a research based degree. At the taught level, the student

would take coursework and complete a dissertation based on a field in which they are interested. At the research level, the student would define a research project based on an area of interest to complete over a few years, but no formal coursework requirement is in place. The student may wish to take elective courses at this level also; however, it is not mandatory and will not count towards their degree progress (John Alexander, personal communication, 07/18/2006).

In the United States, however, there is no classified difference between research and taught doctoral degrees. At both the applied and research levels, coursework and research is required to complete the doctoral degree. Take for example, the comparison of the Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) and Doctor of Philosophy in Education (Ph.D.) degrees at the University of Southern California compared to the Ed.D. and Ph.D. in Scotland. The Ed.D. in both Scotland and the USA will consist of taught coursework followed by an individual dissertation. For the Ph.D., Scottish universities require no coursework with the total focus being on research. American universities require a certain amount of coursework and research to meet the objectives of the area of specialization.

Private and Public Universities

Another stark difference between US and Scottish universities is the public and private schools. Scottish universities are public institutions. Private schools do not exist. However, the *ancient* schools such as University of Glasgow, University of Edinburgh, and St. Andrews University are allowed to be more selective in their student population than general colleges and universities such as Napier University or Glasgow-Caledonian University. All universities receive funding from the state or Scottish Executive at a set amount depending on their student enrollment.

In contrast, the United States has both private and public four-year and two-year colleges and universities. The public schools receive funding from the federal government, which prohibits universities from discriminating; however, individual state governments may set quotas that they feel are adequate areas for their state populations. Private schools receive federal funding in the form of research grants and student aid; therefore they may not discriminate but have individual control over quotas for the university.

Academic Divisions and Units

Similar to the United States structure of academic divisions, Scottish universities are divided into subsections called Faculties. A faculty at a Scottish university would be equivalent to a School at a college or university. For example, the Faculty of Science and Engineering, in Scotland, would be equivalent to the School of Science and Engineering, in America. Much like American college, Scottish faculties have a division head or dean who directs initiatives and strategic plans for the faculty (Sinclair, 2006).

Academic Progress and Advising

Academic advising also plays an integral role in the success of Scottish students at any two-year or four-year university or college. Students entering in straight from secondary education, after completion of their “highers,” might not be ready to decide on a major, and as a result may vacillate between subjects. The “highers” are exams required to enter further and higher education. These are similar to taking a required entrance exam such as the SAT. Mature

learners need advice in the same manner, especially if they are fulfilling degree requirements to advance in their work field. Academic advising helps make sure students are taking courses they need to fulfill their major requirements within a specific area inside a faculty.

Many of the universities in Scotland utilize the Internet to facilitate the spread of information about services available to their students. Glasgow Caledonian University recently introduced “The Base” a service that allows students to come inquire about any topic, and even schedule appointments with advisors at the same time (J. Kmita – Dawson, personal communication, July 20, 2006). Referrals are made out to sources that are not covered at The Base. For students uncomfortable with visiting in person, the entire service is also located online for convenience.

At St. Andrew’s University, SALTIRE, St. Andrews Learning and Teaching: Innovation, Review and Enhancement, offers support to students and staff/faculty alike in academic studies and even upcoming related events (St. Andrew’s Website). Students with trouble in the classroom taking notes, or even studying can meet one on one with teachers and learn techniques to help improve their study habits. Booklets are available for students to download from the Internet, and further their study habits in a variety of organizational topics (St. Andrew’s Website). Academic advising is mandatory for all students and they meet with an advisor specific to their course of study (St. Andrews website).

Universities and colleges in the United States have differing policies with regards to academic advising. Many schools require that students entering into a program during orientation meet one on one with an advisor who will help develop a course of study based on the student’s reported interests.

Another point of interest with Scottish schools, as compared to American institutions, is that they provide pastoral care to all their students. Pastoral care is administered by a staff member who looks after the student’s emotional, spiritual and mental well-being as compared to their academic progress. Pastoral care may be mandated at some universities depending on the student’s issues during their program (Lynda Ali, personal communication, 07/24/2006). In the United States, to receive this sort of care, a student would need to speak with a counselor in a center or, for spiritual reasons, meet with the campus chaplain or religious office.

Learning from Each Other

Scottish and American colleges and universities can learn much from each other by creating an open dialogue between the two countries. For academic programs and degree progress in the United States, we can provide staff and faculty who both provide sound advice on completing a degree and on personal matters of a student. Building a careful relationship with the student could help a student succeed in their academic program. For academic divisions, the United States can learn how to consolidate and centralize programs that have common core values and areas of interest. This would improve communication between the departments and aid in collaborative research—an area that is of extreme interest in United States institutions of higher education at this time. For the United States, citizens can learn that a good education does not have to be distinguished by a public or private school. All universities should be supported

by the same dollars as they are in Scotland. A more prestigious university could require more tuition or raise their admission standards to choose more selective students.

With graduate degrees, Scotland could learn the value of having core courses required for a research degree to enhance a student's proficiency in research methods or a subject area. For the United States, we could learn the value of requiring students to become independent learners and create their own destiny by researching their own areas of interest during their program. For undergraduate degrees, American universities can learn that students can be independent thinkers and make them really learn their subjects instead of having completely taught degrees. Additionally, the American institutions should learn that not all degrees are meant to be completed in four years. Some degrees can be shorter; others can be longer depending on the area studied. A student should not be penalized, as they are now, for taking longer to complete a degree. For degree progress from high school to graduate school, both Scotland and the United States should look at ways to increase access for more students and collaborate on issues that are common to both countries.

Conclusion

Scotland provides a valuable location to study the difference in higher education systems between the United States and itself. From academic structure to academic advising, institutions in both universities can learn how to better educate and provide services for the next generation of college bound students.

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