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**Abstract**

Where does higher education in the United Kingdom sit today in terms of the public?private distinction, and what does that distinction mean in the higher education context? This article considers these questions and related issues, noting how the particular example of the United Kingdom compares with other systems internationally. Following a historical exploration of the meaning of 'public', 'private' and other related terms, an examination is undertaken of their currency during the post-war period in the UK higher education system. This is exemplified through an analysis of the two major British higher education reports of the last 50 years ? the Robbins Report of 1963 and the Dearing Report of 1997. It is argued that the contemporary UK higher education system could be seen as suffering from the worst of both worlds, trapped between and suffering from the seemingly contrary pressures of privatisation and nationalisation. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)