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Cap and Gown? Use of Headgear at Graduation in UK Universities in the Twenty-First Century

By Martin J. Hardcastle

Academic headwear, particularly in the form of the square cap or mortar-board, is perhaps the most widely recognised symbol of educational achievement in the world. The square cap in particular is symbolic of universities in iconography world-wide, and has spread from its origins as clerical and then academic dress in the United Kingdom to become a component of graduation ceremonies in many countries that otherwise nowadays have little cultural connection to the UK. It is therefore perhaps surprising that a number of universities in the UK restrict the use of headwear during graduation and that some have adopted schemes of academic dress that do not include it or have abolished it altogether. In this article I aim to survey the current practice at graduation ceremonies in UK universities, to understand whether there are common factors in the use or disuse of headwear, and thus tentatively to explain the wide variation in practice that is seen in the twenty-first century.

Introduction

The square cap, trencher or mortar-board is possibly the most widely recognised symbol of academic achievement in the world. Hargrave[1] traces the historical origin of the cap from the middle ages to the final form that it arrived at in the eighteenth century, and both he and Keenan[2] discuss the fact that in some of the older universities the use of headwear in general and the cap in particular[3] seems to be in decline, in spite of its world-wide recognition. At the same time, new universities in the UK continue to adopt it with enthusiasm, with the effect that stock photos of graduation celebrations, when they are British at all,[4] often represent newer institutions. In practice, the differences are not as simple as hats being used at some institutions and disused at others. I have attended or participated in graduation ceremonies at six UK universities, all of which have treated headwear somewhat differently from any of the rest. Rather than looking at the practices of one institution or a few institutions in detail, it seems worthwhile to establish an overview of the situation throughout the UK.

1 S. A. Hargrave, 'The Church and the Trencher: An Examination into How England's Changing Theology and Church Have Influenced the Evolution and Design of the Square Cap Causing its Use as Academic Attire', *TBS*, 14 (2014), pp. 16–34, at <newprairiepress.org/burgonsociety> https://doi.org/10.4148/2475-7799.1116.

2 O. J. Keenan, 'How Can Academical Dress Survive in the Third Millennium?', *TBS*, 10 (2010), pp. 99–125, https://doi.org/10.4148/2475-7799.1086.

3 Throughout this paper I refer to academic headgear in general as 'hats'—this should be taken to include the square cap in its various forms, the round doctor's bonnet and the other less common forms such as the John Knox cap. Where 'cap' is used it refers explicitly to the square cap.

4 Often the UK media use stock photos of North American academic dress, in which the cap tassel hangs from a cord.

In this article I exclusively consider the use of academic dress at graduation ceremonies. All universities in the UK have some form of ceremony in which either degrees are conferred or degree certificates are presented and all either require or strongly encourage the wearing of academic dress—i.e., always the gown, almost always the hood, and sometimes the hat—for students who wish to participate in them. For simplicity I shall use the term 'graduation ceremony' for all of these, and the term 'graduand' for the recipients of degrees, irrespective of whether the participants are actually formally graduating. Outside the ancient universities of England and Scotland, the graduation ceremony will be the only encounter with academic dress for most students (and their families) and quite often the only occasion across the whole university when academic dress is worn. The regulations (or traditions with the same force) that apply in graduation ceremonies become, de facto, the understanding of what academic dress actually is,[5] and may in the end come to affect the rules of academic dress de jure, a point I shall return to later. In the following sections I present my approach to gathering data, a summary of the results and observed relationships between them, a discussion of the obvious groupings among institutions, and some initial conclusions.

Approach

The study of graduation ceremonies has the advantage that they are extremely well documented. In the past few years most universities have moved to live-streaming their graduation ceremonies and of those many make video of the full ceremony available on the Internet via YouTube, Facebook or their own video-sharing sites. Only a few of the older universities have resisted this trend. In addition, information aimed at graduands can usually be found on the public Internet, although the details of academic dress are very often 'outsourced' to the university's official robemaker.

My approach in this article is to look for a combination of written, photographic and video evidence for a particular university's practice regarding graduands. I first checked the university's own description of the dress code for graduation, where available; this often explicitly mentions headgear as a component of the required academic dress, or implies its existence by mentioning head measurements, or in some cases implies its absence by saying that academic dress consists of gown and hood. In a very few cases the use of headgear is explicitly forbidden. In a large number of cases, however, the documentation is not sufficient to establish what the actual practice is, particularly when it consists of little more than a link to the robemakers' website. University graduation websites are almost always illustrated by images of graduands and graduates and if they are shown without hats it is very likely that hats are not used—this is the case for most of the Scottish universities, for example. But neither the written or photographic evidence is always definitive.

I therefore made use, where possible, of the most recent publicly available video evidence of what happens in the ceremony itself. These were usually from 2019, the previous full year at the time of writing, but sometimes only earlier videos were available: very few were from ceremonies earlier than 2015, and when this is the case it is noted in Table 1. The video almost always provides details of practice that are not mentioned in the guidance provided to graduands. Where available, the most recent video of a full ceremony provided by the university itself was used; if none is available, I use either 'highlights' videos or, as a

5 At staff robing for Hertfordshire graduation ceremonies I have encountered graduates of Cambridge and Bristol who were surprised to learn that hats were a permitted part of their academic dress.

last resort, unofficial video posted by graduates. I tried to avoid videos of graduation ceremonies in countries other than the UK as the practice there may not exactly follow that of the home institution. For the purpose of this study, the key moment is the presentation of individual graduands to the presiding officer—all graduation ceremonies have this aspect in some form. If graduands are wearing hats at this point, it is safe to assume that they will be wearing them throughout the ceremony. Where the video showed that hats are not worn at the time of presentation, I checked the video in more detail, if possible, to try to establish whether hats are worn at any other stage and, if so, when. Hats are almost universal for senior officials at least at some point in the ceremony, and also widely used by participating academic staff, even in those universities where they are not used by graduands, and I do not generally consider this aspect of the ceremony further.

The universities considered here are all the full degree-granting universities listed in the latest edition of Shaw's Academical Dress—hereafter Groves[6]—or their successors after merger or renaming, currently in existence and located in the United Kingdom. The universities in the Irish Republic listed by Groves are excluded, as are Royal Colleges with degree-granting powers. The use of Groves' list as a starting point allows a comparison between actual practice and the regulations as listed by Groves. In Table 1 I list the 121 institutions meeting these criteria together with the date when they started to award degrees in their own right as given by Groves, the nation of the United Kingdom where they are located, and a numerical categorization of the practices related to headwear at graduation. Notes in the table draw attention to variations in the form of the ceremony or the data available.

Results

Summary statistics

Each of the 121 universities considered in this study can be placed in one of four broad groups, as follows: these are used to categorize institutions in Table 1.

1. Hats do not form part of the academic dress of the university, or by custom are not used at all by graduands (including outside the ceremony), or are optional but normally unused by graduands.
2. Hats form part of the prescribed academic dress but are not worn at all in the ceremony (can be distinguished from (1) if photography outside the ceremony shows hats being worn).
3. Hats are worn as part of the ceremony but not during the presentation of graduands; most commonly new graduates wear them when processing out of the ceremony location, but they may be required to carry them during the presentation as well, or explicitly instructed by the presiding officer to put them on at some point in the ceremony.
4. Hats are worn by all graduands throughout the ceremony.

Of these it is relatively easy to distinguish (4) in video evidence, relatively easy to distinguish (1) from a combination of video, written and photographic evidence, and somewhat harder to distinguish (2) and (3) from each other, since it is possible that hats are being worn off-camera in a ceremony that I class as (2); fortunately there are relatively few institutions that fall into this intermediate category.

6 N. Groves, *Shaw's Academical Dress of Great Britain and Ireland*, 3rd edn (London: Burgon Society, 2011).

Table 1. British universities' hat-wearing practices

Nations: England, **W**ales, **S**cotland and **N**orthern Ireland.
Category 1 Caps not used. **2** Caps not in ceremony. **3** Caps not at presentation. **4** Caps used throughout.
Evidence: the numbers refer to hyperlinks in the online version of this chart, found at <https://www.extragalactic.info/tbs>
Notes: C denotes that 'capping' of graduands is practised in the ceremony and **H** denotes hooding.

Name	Date	Nation	Cat.	Evidence	Notes
Aberdeen	1495	S	3	[1][2]	CH
Abertay	1994	S	1	[3][4]	C
Aberystwyth	2009	W	4	[5][6]	
Anglia Ruskin	1993	E	4	[7]	
University of the Arts, London	2004	E	4	[8]	
Aston	1966	E	4	[9][10]	
Bangor	2007	W	4	[11][12]	
Bath	1966	E	3	[13][14][15]	CH (doctors)
Bath Spa	2006	E	4	[16]	
Bedfordshire	2006	E	4	[17][18]	
Birmingham	1900	E	4	[19][20]	
Birmingham City	1993	E	4	[21]	
Bishop Grosseteste	2008	E	3	[22][23]	
Bolton	2004	E	4	[24][25]	
Bournemouth	1993	E	4	[26][27]	
Bradford	1963	E	4	[28][29][30]	Groves says hats forbidden
Brighton	1993	E	4	[31][32]	
Bristol	1909	E	1	[33][34]	Higher doctors and honorands wear hats
Brunel	1966	E	4	[35][36]	
Buckingham	1983	E	4	[37]	
Buckinghamshire New University	2007	E	4	[38]	
Cambridge	1209	E	1	[39]	No video available. Hats optional.
Canterbury Christ Church	2005	E	4	[40][41]	
Cardiff	2004	W	4	[42]	
Central Lancashire	1993	E	4	[43][44]	
Chester	2005	E	4	[45][46]	
Chichester	2005	E	4	[47][48]	
City	1963	E	3	[49][50][51]	
Coventry	1993	E	2	[52]	
Cranfield	1993	E	4	[53]	

Name	Date	Nation	Cat.	Evidence	Notes
University for the Creative Arts	2008	E	4	[54]	
Cumbria	2007	E	4	[55][56]	
De Montfort	1992	E	4	[57]	
Derby	1993	E	4	[58]	
Dundee	1967	S	1	[59][60]	C
Durham	1832	E	1	[61][62][63]	Hats now abolished below higher doctorates. No recent video available.
East Anglia	1963	E	4	[64][65]	
East London	1992	E	4	[66][67]	
Edge Hill	2006	E	4	[68][69]	
Edinburgh	1582	S	1	[70][71][72]	C
Edinburgh Napier	1992	S	1	[73][74]	Hats not listed in Groves
Essex	1965	E	4	[75]	
Exeter	1955	E	4	[76][77]	
Falmouth	2005	E	4	[78][79]	
Glasgow	1451	S	1	[80][81]	C
Glasgow Caledonian	1993	S	1	[82][83]	C Honorands wear hats
Gloucestershire	2001	E	4	[84]	
Greenwich	1993	E	4	[85][86]	
Harper Adams	1996	E	4	[87][88]	
Heriot-Watt	1966	S	1	[89][90]	C
Hertfordshire	1992	E	4	[91][92]	
Highlands and Islands	2011	S	1	[93]	C
Huddersfield	1992	E	4	[94][95]	
Hull	1954	E	4	[96]	
Imperial	2007	E	1	[97]	
John Moores, Liverpool	1992	E	4	[98]	
Keele	1962	E	4	[99][100]	Video of presentation not found
Kent	1965	E	4	[101]	
King's College London	2007	E	1	[102][103]	Hats not part of scheme: Groves
Kingston	1992	E	4	[104]	
Lancaster	1966	E	4	[105]	
Leeds	1904	E	1	[106][107]	PhD graduands wear hats
Leeds Beckett	1992	E	4	[108][109]	
Leicester	1957	E	2	[110][111]	

Name	Date	Nation	Cat.	Evidence	Notes
Lincoln	1992	E	4	[112][113]	
Liverpool	1903	E	4	[114][115]	
Liverpool Hope	2005	E	3	[116][117]	CH
London	1836	E	4	[118]	
University College London	2007	E	4	[119][120]	
London Metropolitan	2002	E	4	[121][122]	
London School of Economics	2007	E	3	[123][124]	Carried
Loughborough	1966	E	4	[125][126]	Instructions to graduands and practice are inconsistent!
Manchester	2004	E	3	[127][128]	
Manchester Metropolitan	1992	E	4	[129]	
Middlesex	1992	E	4	[130][131]	
Newcastle	1963	E	1	[132][133]	H Higher doctors wear hats
Northampton	2005	E	3	[134][135]	
Northumbria	1992	E	3	[136][137]	
Norwich University of the Arts	2008	E	4	[138]	
Nottingham	1948	E	2	[139][140]	
Nottingham Trent	1992	E	4	[141][142]	
Open	1969	E	1	[143][144]	
Oxford	1096	E	3	[145][146]	Hats required in the ceremony but not worn. No recent/official video available
Oxford Brookes	1992	E	4	[147][148]	
Plymouth	1992	E	4	[149][150]	
Plymouth Marjon	2007	E	4	[151][152]	
Portsmouth	1992	E	4	[153][154]	
Queen's University Belfast	1909	N	1	[155][156]	
Queen Margaret	2007	S	1	[157][158]	C
Reading	1926	E	4	[159]	
Robert Gordon	1993	S	2	[160][161]	CH
Roehampton	2004	E	3	[162][163][164]	
St Andrews	1410	S	1	[165][166]	CH
St Mary's	2007	E	3	[167][168]	
Salford	1967	E	3	[169][170]	
Sheffield	1905	E	4	[171][172]	

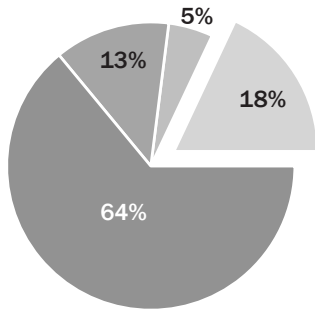
Name	Date	Nation	Cat.	Evidence	Notes
Sheffield Hallam	1992	E	4	[173][174]	
South Bank University	1992	E	4	[175]	
Southampton	1952	E	4	[176][177]	
Southampton Solent	2005	E	4	[178][179]	
Staffordshire	1992	E	4	[180][181]	
Stirling	1967	S	1	[182][183]	Hats not part of scheme: Groves
Strathclyde	1964	S	1	[184]	C
Suffolk	2007	E	4	[185]	
Sunderland	1992	E	3	[186][187]	
Surrey	1966	E	3	[188][189] [190]	PhD graduands wear hats
Sussex	1961	E	4	[191][192]	
Swansea	2005	W	4	[193][194]	
Teesside	1992	E	4	[195][196]	
Ulster	1984	N	4	[197][198]	
Wales Trinity St David	2010	W	4	[199]	
Warwick	1964	E	4	[200]	
West London	1992	E	4	[201][202]	
West of England	1992	E	4	[203]	
West of Scotland	2007	S	1	[204]	CH
Westminster	1992	E	4	[205]	
Winchester	2007	E	2	[206]	
Wolverhampton	1992	E	4	[207][208]	
Worcester	2005	E	2	[209][210]	
York	1963	E	4	[211][212]	
York St John	2007	E	3	[213][214]	

A few universities use hats at presentation for PhD graduands (Leeds and Surrey are noted in the table) but not at the level of masters' or bachelors' degrees. Newcastle and Bristol use hats for the presentation of substantive higher doctors (the former caught on video, the latter according to their regulations). As video evidence of the form of even PhD presentations is not easy to find for all universities and higher doctorates are very rare, the results in the table cannot be systematic and I classify universities according to the headwear allowed for the non-doctoral degrees, while noting that in many cases PhDs and other 'lower' doctorates are treated identically to the lower degrees. The treatment of honorary graduands varies widely and again the table is not intended to be systematic.

Table 2 shows the number of institutions broken down by each category, and the total.

At this point it is worth noting the existence of the practices which I will refer to as 'capping' (where the graduand is lightly tapped on the head with a cap or something ap-

Chart 1.
All institutions



Categories in graphs

1	Caps not used
2	Caps not in ceremony
3	Caps not at presentation
4	Caps used throughout

Table 2 and Chart 2. Numbers of institutions in different categories

	Category				
Country	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**Total**
England	8	5	15	71	**99**
Scotland	13	1	1	0	**15**
Wales	0	0	0	5	**5**
Northern Ireland	1	0	0	1	**2**
Total	**22**	**6**	**16**	**77**	**121**

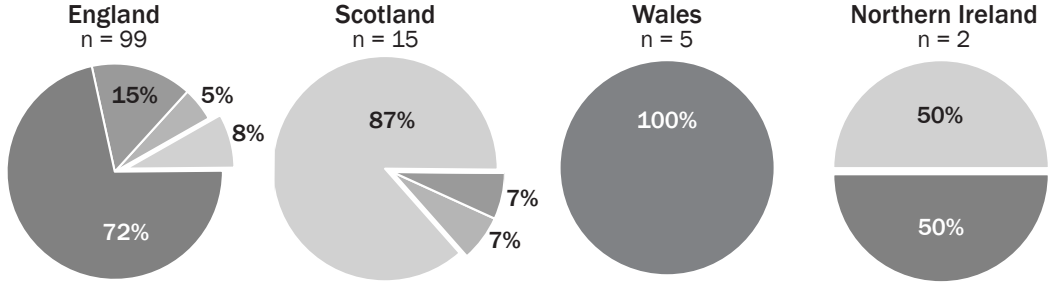
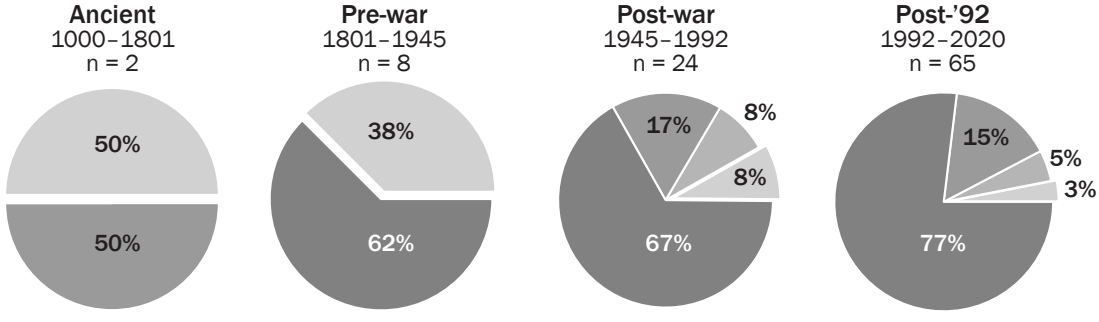


Table 3 and Chart 3. Practices of English universities by date of foundation

	Category					Cats 2–4
Date range	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**Total**	**(per cent)**
Ancient (1000–1800)	1	0	1	0	**2**	50.0
Pre-war (1801–1944)	3	0	0	5	**8**	62.5
Post-war (1945–1991)	2	2	4	16	**24**	91.7
Post-'92 (1992–2019)	2	3	10	50	**65**	96.9
Total	**8**	**5**	**15**	**71**	**99**	**91.9**



proximating a cap) and 'hooding' (where the graduand arrives on the stage carrying, not wearing, their hood and has it placed over their head before being greeted by the presiding officer). These are very widespread in Scotland and much less common in the rest of the UK.

Practices by nation and foundation date

There are too few universities in Wales and Northern Ireland to draw conclusions: broadly they seem to follow the same practices as England. All universities in Wales use hats throughout the ceremony.

However, there are very obvious differences between Scotland and the rest of the UK. Scottish universities almost universally do not use hats; the only exceptions are the two universities in Aberdeen, where hats form part of the dress but are not used during the presentation ceremony (categories 2 and 3). Thus 87 per cent of universities are in category 1. In the rest of the UK, 72 per cent of institutions are in category 4 and only 8 per cent in category 1—clearly a significant difference.

Practice is more variable in England than in any other nation of the UK (there are of course many more universities in England than in the other nations) and so it is interesting to break the English universities down further. The obvious subdivision is by date of foundation (as independent degree-awarding bodies that host their own graduation ceremonies), and this is shown in Table 3.

Although the numbers of older universities are small compared to the explosion of post-'92 institutions, it is clear that generally older universities are more likely to have abandoned the use of headwear at graduation altogether. The two post-'92 institutions that do not use hats at all are King's College and Imperial College, London, and these are only post-'92 in the technical sense that their independent degree-awarding powers date only from the twenty-first century. I return to this point below.

Notes on some institutions

In this section I provide some additional notes on the practice of individual institutions where the categorization is doubtful or needs to be clarified.

Oxford (category 3). The instructional video provided by Oxford and linked from the table shows that graduands do not wear hats in the Sheldonian when being presented for their degrees; nor do they wear them when returning in the gown and hood of their new degree. However, they are required to have the caps with them and to 'cap' the academic procession as it leaves the Sheldonian. On the basis that graduands would not be admitted to the ceremony without having the cap I have placed Oxford in category 3. There would be an argument for placing it in category 2.

Cambridge (category 1). As with Oxford, caps should be carried rather than worn by graduands in the Senate house, but, unlike the case at Oxford, caps are not a required part of academic dress for undergraduates. They may be carried by graduands, but the form of the Cambridge graduation ceremony makes this inconvenient, as discussed in more detail below, and in practice few if any graduands use them. For this reason it seems most appropriate to place Cambridge in category 1.

Durham (category 1). A full set of headwear is listed by Groves, but Durham has effectively abolished hats for degrees below higher doctorates in their current regulations.[7]

7 Durham University Calendar, at <www.dur.ac.uk/university.calendar/volumei/academic_dress/> [retrieved 7 February 2021].

Assuming that this was not the case at the time of compilation of the 3rd edition of Groves around 2011, this must have happened in the past decade, and is the only case that I am aware of of an English university removing hats from its formal definition of academic dress, as opposed to never including it in the first place (e.g., King's). Most universities' academic dress regulations are not available on line and so this cannot be investigated systematically.

Bradford (category 4). Groves states that Bradford 'does not permit' the use of the square cap in graduation ceremonies by the regulations, but they are clearly used throughout recent ceremonies and figure strongly in the university's promotional material. Again, assuming that this was not the case in 2011, Bradford must have changed its practice in the last decade.

Men and women

In all the institutions whose graduation ceremonies I have been able to view men and women are treated equally. Formerly there were traditional differences reflecting the different social rules for headwear for the sexes[8] but these seem almost entirely to have died out, although they were alive and well in the Republic of Ireland at least until recently.[9] Although the evolution of these differences towards the current position of complete uniformity would be an interesting topic for historical study, the present paper focuses on the situation at the present day and so I do not consider them further, other than to comment below on their relevance for some present-day urban myths.

Discussion

Why does the practice vary so widely between institutions? I will consider the variation based on the natural groups that emerge from Tables 2 and 3.

Ancient English universities

The forms of the graduation ceremony in Oxford and Cambridge can be seen from illustrations to have changed relatively little since the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Although a more detailed examination of the historical evidence would be interesting, it seems that (male) graduands have gone bare-headed continuously for at least a century and probably much longer. The practices we see now are quite natural in the context of, say, the late nineteenth century, which differed from that of the early twenty-first in three key respects:

1. Academic dress was, much more than it is today, 'uniform' for members of the university and cap and gown would have been worn in the streets;

2. All adults would have been familiar with a much wider range of formal headwear than most of us use today but also, crucially, with the etiquette for when it should and should not be worn;

8 See, e.g., S. Wearden,'How Academic Dress Is Mobilized in Degree Ceremonies and to What Effect', *TBS*, 15 (2015), pp. 14–29, at p. 24 for a discussion of a very recent change at Lancaster, doi.org/10.4148/2475-7799.1131.

9 See, e.g., E. Brauders, 'Hats off!', *The University Times*, 16 January 2015, at <www.universitytimes.ie/2015/01/hats-off/> [retrieved 8 June 2021]: the history of the urban myths surrounding the Irish practice would also be an interesting topic for investigation.

3. The graduation ceremony was then actually, as it still is in form at these universities, not a celebration of graduation but a collective request on the part of the graduands to be permitted to graduate, reflecting the origin of graduation ceremonies as 'quality control' for the medieval university.

Traditional hat etiquette is not quite as simple as the rule that it is often reduced to: 'men should remove their hats indoors'. The removal of a hat is a sign of respect or submission (which is why senior officials in these ceremonies do not remove hats[10]). But in the context of graduations it would be entirely normal for the graduands, who were making a humble request of the whole university[11] to be allowed to receive their degrees, to remove their caps in the Sheldonian or the Senate House, putting them back on again when they left. Oxford preserves this almost completely;[12] Cambridge has lost it to the extent that caps are no longer required with the gown in general[13] but preserves it in that caps, if brought into the Senate House, must be carried and not worn.

It is tempting to suggest that the change in Cambridge regulations in so far as they cover graduation, and in practice where not covered by regulations, is a pragmatic one. The form of the Cambridge graduation (in which the graduand kneels, bare-headed, and offers both his or her hands to be clasped by the Vice-Chancellor) means that a hat would have to be placed on the floor of the Senate House.[14] A graduand in this ceremony has a hard enough job to avoid tripping over the hem of the gown on rising without having to remember to pick up a hat as well. It is possible there has been some relaxation of the Cambridge practice back towards the use of hats—in the 1990s my college firmly instructed graduands not to bring them to the ceremony, whereas now it is made clear that they are optional—but both tradition and convenience point in the same direction here and it seems unlikely that they will ever make a full reappearance.

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10 Long-established practice: see Joseph Wells, *The Oxford Degree Ceremony* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906), p. 4.

11 See for example the wording of the 'grace' that introduces the presentation of graduands at Cambridge: 'Supplicant reverentiis vestris viri mulieresque … ut gradum quisque rite petivit assequatur'; '[These] men and women beg your reverences … that they may proceed to the degrees for which each has applied according to the regulations'.

12 The different rules for wearing what used to be called the Oxford women's soft cap, now rare and in principle allowed irrespective of gender, preserve the different hat etiquette for women.

13 *The Statutes and Ordinances of the University of Cambridge*, (Cambridge University Press, 2019), chapter 2, specify under 'headdresses': 'with all other gowns, for residents the square cap: provided that an undergraduate shall wear either the square cap or no headdress.' The 'provided that' stems from amendments first made due to a materials shortage during the Second World War, but made permanent in 1953: see Keenan, p. 102. In practice, although the wording here covers only undergraduates, the carrying of a cap in the Senate House by resident graduates is not enforced.

14 As can be seen in the 1904 drawing by Sydney Hall from the Graphic reproduced by A. Kerr, 'Academic Dress on Picture Postcards Published by Davis's of Oxford, their Rivals and Successors', *TBS*, 18 (2018), pp. 75–106, at p. 90, https://doi.org/10.4148/2475-7799.1157, though here the position of the hat is surely artistic licence; the graduand has just finished holding the praelector's finger with his right hand and so the cap should be on the floor to his left. Those Cambridge graduands wishing to take a cap into the Senate House are currently instructed that it should be carried in the left hand.

Scotland

The Scottish universities have almost universally rejected headwear at graduation—only the two universities in Aberdeen make any use of hats. The remaining 12 institutions, which do not use them at all, include the remaining three ancient Scottish universities as well as some very modern foundations, some of which (Stirling is mentioned by Groves and Edinburgh Napier is implied) have never included hats in their scheme of academic dress. Dickson[15] describes how, in the case of Glasgow, a scheme of academic dress on the English model was initially imposed from outside in the nineteenth century—it is clear from Dickson's account that hats never had a very secure part in the resulting scheme in practice and they have now been abolished, except for senior officials, in the cause of bringing the regulations in line with tradition. It is plausible that the same is the case for Edinburgh, though not for St Andrews where hats are apparently still used outside graduation along with other aspects of traditional academic dress.[16] For all the ancient Scottish universities we would expect considerations similar to those for Oxford and Cambridge, discussed above, to have governed the historical form of the ceremony in terms of when headwear would be appropriate. In addition, all but two of the Scottish institutions practice 'capping', as mentioned above, and four of them also make use of 'hooding': these would be both impractical and also slightly absurd if the graduand were wearing a hat at presentation.[17] At Glasgow 'capping' pre-dates the reintroduction of hats, and has survived their abandonment.[18] The complete absence of hats outside Aberdeen in the new universities may have something to do with the use of capping but is more likely an intentional conformation on the part of the university authorities to the locally prestigious norm set by St Andrews, Glasgow and Edinburgh. (The different approach taken by Robert Gordon University must surely be a result of the practice at the University of Aberdeen.)

Modern English universities in categories 1–3

It is interesting first of all to consider the remaining English universities that do not allow headgear at all, or restrict it to doctors or to higher doctors. Durham's tradition of not using hats at graduation presumably has similar origins to the practices of Oxford and Cambridge, but has taken a stronger form. Hats were still in use in the 1960s but, as noted above, have now been formally abolished even up to the level of PhDs. The reason for this is most likely to be have been, like Glasgow, a desire to bring the regulations in line with the practice at graduation—with the implicit assumption that academic dress regulations are only relevant to graduation ceremonies held at Durham. Newcastle is the offspring of Durham and inherited many of its traditions related to graduation, such as the dress of senior officials: it seems likely therefore that Durham had largely abandoned the use of hats by the mid-1960s when the first Newcastle students would have been graduating.

Newcastle is one of the few universities to provide an explanation for its practice, on its website:

15 N. Dickson, 'Tradition and Humour: the Academic Dress of the University of Glasgow', *TBS*, 12 (2012), pp. 10–35, doi.org/10.4148/2475-7799.1097.

16 Hargrave, p. 21.

17 Newcastle, which is one of the few English universities to use hooding, does combine it with hats in the case of higher doctors, at great risk to the dignity of all involved.

18 Dickson, p. 14

> Most academic dress at Newcastle University does not include a mortar board, by tradition. The story goes that when Newcastle became an independent university in 1963, students celebrated freedom by throwing their traditional hats into the River Tyne.
>
> Since then, Newcastle University academic dress has not included a mortar board.[19]

This story is, of course, an urban myth that is very unlikely to contain any truth at all, as is the story told at Durham that students threw their caps into the river at the time of the admission of women to Durham (in 1881!), and similar stories that circulated at Bristol and Cambridge in my time there.[20] While unfortunately I have not been able to date this more precisely, it does not seem implausible that the change in attitude to headgear at Durham and Newcastle dates from the 1960s, a decade not just of social change but of changes in non-academic fashion. The Open University, founded in 1969, owes its long-standing tradition of using no headgear at all, which continues to surprise students to this day, to its foundation in the same decade and the intention of its founders to break away from the practice of the older universities.[21] Of the other older institutions in category 1, only Leeds provides an explanation for its practice in its publicly available regulations,[22] and this simply attributes it to tradition:

> Those being awarded diplomas, first degrees and masters degrees at the University's degree ceremonies wear academic dress: they do not, through long established University custom and practice, wear the cap (mortar-board) prescribed as part of full academic dress.

By contrast Bristol's custom, which denies hats to 'lower' doctors at graduation as well, is directly inconsistent with their regulations which specify that graduates 'shall wear' a cap or bonnet. Bristol, Leeds, and Queen's University Belfast, as early twentieth-century institutions, passed through the same social transition as Durham—but so did Liverpool and Birmingham, of similar date, and they retain (or have reintroduced?) the use of headgear at graduations. Detailed historical work would need to be done to understand why these institutions followed such different paths.

The case of the two 'twenty-first-century' institutions that do not allow hats is an interesting one. As is well known, King's College London designed an entirely new form of academic dress on starting to award its own degrees; it is perhaps not surprising that this did not include hats since it constituted an intentional and publicly stated break with tradition.[23] However, Imperial's scheme, which is much more traditional, does not allow

19 Newcastle University Congregations, at <www.ncl.ac.uk/congregations/before/gownhire/> [retrieved 7 February 2021].

20 The 'protest at the admission of women' story may have its origin in the differences between etiquette for men and women, discussed above, in which men would remove their hats indoors but women would not; if so, it must have arisen some time between the period when these were alive and well socially, and would have been understood as social rules by those participating in the ceremonies, and the period when the universities moved to a gender-neutral position in their regulations.

21 Hargrave, p. 16; Wearden, pp 21–23; Goff, Philip, 'Blithering Nonsense: The Open University and its Academic Dress', *TBS*, 19 (2019), pp. 7–37, doi.org/10.4148/2475-7799.1160.

22 Leeds University General Regulations, Section 1, Academic Dress, at <www.leeds.ac.uk /secretariat/general_regulations.html>, [retrieved 7 February 2021].

23 Comparable to the unsuccessful, and now largely reverted, redesign of headgear for the University of East Anglia: see discussion by Groves.

hats at graduation except for honorands (Groves suggests that they are specified in the regulations, but these are not available online). In establishing a 'tradition' that hats are not worn at graduation, did Imperial intend to contrast with the post-'92 universities discussed below and link to the tradition of other Russell Group institutions like Durham, Bristol, Leeds and Queen's?

We can now consider institutions in categories 2 and 3—that is, universities where graduands get hats as part of their (normally hired) academic dress but do not wear them at all during the ceremony, or do not wear them until some specified stage in the proceedings after presentation. One new university, Worcester, in category 2, provides an explanation for its practice in material provided to graduands: 'In order to respect the wishes of the Dean and Chapter of Worcester Cathedral you are requested to remove your mortar board whilst inside the Cathedral.'[24] This is interesting, since a number of institutions use cathedrals for their graduation ceremonies, including Coventry, Liverpool Hope, Winchester and York St John, all of which are in categories 2 or 3 (but see below for more discussion of York St John). However, other institutions use cathedrals and appear to have no problem with hats being worn throughout (Canterbury Christ Church and Hertfordshire being two examples)—presumably the requirements of the cathedral authorities are different in different cases. The practices of Leicester and Nottingham, both pre-1960s foundations that prescribe hats but don't allow graduands to wear them during the ceremony, have no obvious explanation unless they are adhering to a version of the Oxford tradition.

A small number of post-'92 institutions have a tradition of hats not being worn until the end of the ceremony, e.g., when new graduates follow the academic procession out of the venue. Some, including York St John (as seen in the linked video) and Sunderland, have the graduates don their hats at a specific instruction from the presiding officer, the idea presumably being to mark the transition from graduand to graduate. From a historical perspective, this makes little sense—if anything the hood, rather than the hat, has been the mark of the graduate since at least the seventeenth century.[25] As a piece of ceremonial, though, it seems quite effective. One can imagine that other institutions, both in England and in the wider world, may over time develop their own interpretation of the meaning and function of academic dress in general and the wearing of headgear in particular. However, it is hard to see in the present climate any English university that has moved to hat-wearing throughout the ceremony stepping away from it again.

Modern English and Welsh universities in category 4

As we have seen, a substantial majority of English universities—and all the Welsh ones—take the very simple approach of having the graduands wear the full academic dress appropriate to their degree throughout the ceremony. The proportion doing this is 71 per cent overall, and 77 per cent among the post-'92s.

24 University of Worcester Awards Ceremonies 2019, at <www2.worc.ac.uk/registryservices/documents/graduation-info-2019.pdf> [retrieved 7 February 2021].

25 Wells, p. 73, laments the fact that the cap has ceased to be the marker of the highest degrees, presented with high ceremonial at inception ceremonies, and has descended to mere undergraduates and choristers.

As discussed above in the context of the ancient universities, from a historical point of view it is this practice that is anomalous, but in practical terms it is now the norm in England and Wales. It is interesting to ask why this has come about, but probably many factors are at play. One may be the fact, intentionally ignored up till now, that many graduation ceremonies do not in fact involve graduation—the degrees have already been conferred in absentia. Thus the graduands actually are graduates, and the element of supplication that was historically present no longer is. Certainly, this is relevant to the former polytechnics in the UK, where degrees were awarded by the CNAA before a presentation ceremony for the new graduates at their institution. However, I would argue that the state of affairs as we see it in the twenty-first century arises principally from a radically different perception of the nature of academic dress from the historical one. From a 'uniform' commonly worn by all members of a university, with differences that depend on status and occasion, academic dress in most universities has become 'graduation attire', which many people will wear only once in a lifetime, and it is then natural for graduands to want to wear what is perceived as full academic dress[26] and to ignore a complex etiquette for the wearing and removal of hats with which few of them are now familiar. In practical terms, new universities will design their schemes of academic dress in close collaboration with the robemakers,[27] the robemakers will presumably suggest hats as part of the scheme for an English or Welsh university, and institutions will generally wish to adopt practices that align as closely as possible with the perceived prestigious historical tradition of academic dress[28] in order to emphasise their own credentials—just as they largely adopt other aspects of graduation ceremonial such as official dress, processions, maces and the like.[29] Hats, gowns and hoods for all graduands are one of many ways in which a new university states its continuity with the perceived historical university tradition, and in this respect perception is far more important than the details of past practice.

Summary and conclusion

We have seen that the use of academic headwear at graduations through the United Kingdom varies widely by nation and by date of foundation, and I argue that the relationships between these can be understood in terms of direct descent from a historical tradition on the one hand and of a modern interpretation of what constitutes a locally prestigious standard of academic dress on the other. All these practices are governed by tradition (often unwritten, sometimes in contradiction to the supposed written regulations) but in some cases institutions are adhering to a genuine historical tradition, in others re-interpreting the tradition to suit the needs of a twenty-first-century university; even the recently invented traditions may no longer be clearly understood by the students and staff of the university

26 Wearden, p. 24.

27 For a discussion of the process for one post-'92 institution, see P. Goff 'An Inside Job: Reflections on Designs of Academical and Official Dress for the University of the Arts London (formerly the London Institute)', *TBS*, 18 (2019), pp. 7–31, dx.doi.org/10.4148/2475-7799.1154.

28 I.e., in England and Wales, the use of caps and bonnets; in Scotland, the adoption of other traditions of the ancient universities such as capping.

29 S. Wearden, 2017, The perpetuation of degree ceremonies, PhD thesis, University of Lancaster.

at which they are observed. A survey such as this cannot do more than scratch the surface of the historical detail needed to understand each institution's choices.

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