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Higher education policy as an exercise in contemporary history

GUY NEAVE
International Association of Universities, 1, rue Miokis, F75732 Paris Cedex 15, France

Abstract. The study of higher education is a broad field. A recent estimate identified some 19 different disciplines and perspectives. Such range of perspectives raises central questions as to what might constitute 'the core areas'. Whilst recognising that history does not possess a single dominant paradigm, this article suggests that history opens up several avenues not without interest to policy studies in higher education. By providing issues the outcome of which is known, history may serve as a vehicle for testing the validity of contemporary theories developed in higher education policy studies. The article argues that greater attention ought to be paid – and most particularly in studies involving cross national comparisons – to the cultural and historic specificities that permeate the formal dimensions of law, structure and administrative forms.

Introduction

Without making any claim for the primacy of history, let me simply state that most of the perspectives on which we draw, be they Public Administration, Government, Anthropology or, for that matter, Theology have a temporal dimension. They evolve over time, even if time is not principally their trade. What lies behind the 'cutting edge' of our particular perspectives is, of course, the accumulation of earlier practice, some of which we retain, others not. Each of our disciplines has then its own historiography and within those confines lies another which, if examined, will give us some indication as to when it extended its application into the field of higher education and why, though clearly, the factors which brought about such a rapprochement will depend very much on national circumstance. In short, whether we are conscious of it or not – and awareness, I would suggest, is a rather important point – we are, in different ways contributing to the warp and weft of not just of the history of higher education, but also to the history of higher education studies. Most of us, like Monsieur Jourdan and the art of prose writing, are engaged in developing insights that set higher education within a particular temporal context, sans le savoir.

It is an inevitable stage in the development of an area of scholarship that it should wish to reproduce itself. To do this, requires to some degree that a relatively coherant corpus of knowledge exists and is capable of being

systematically transmitted to those who will, in turn, advance the frontiers of that field further. Failing that, all we have as a memorial to our efforts, will be a considerable literature, a few courses here and there and ourselves, like the Mule, sterile. This would be a pity, of course, since the energy of scholars over the past two decades has brought the field of higher education studies into a rare state of mobilisation. Some 19 disciplines or cross disciplinary perspectives now illuminate our enterprize (Becher 1992). And, as the fundamental issues of system control, autonomy, student access and finance are opened up and restated within a very different political, historical and legal setting (Council of Europe 1996) by the reconstruction of Eastern and Central Europe and as economic integration continues in Western Europe with its political counterpart limping painfully on behind, new combinations of disciplines will emerge. There is already talk of a new member amongst our 'disciplinary' bestiary in the shape of 'cooperation' studies, alternatively termed 'mobility studies' – the one focussing on the institution, the other on students – as a by product of these developments (Blumenthal, Goodwin, Smith and Teichler, 1995).

On studying an evolving institution

One of the difficulties we face lies precisely in a species of dual volatility, which, if each feeds creatively off the other, also tends to make the fixing of frontiers around our field a very fraught affair. I have already touched upon one aspect, namely the multiplication of disciplines or discipline-derived perspectives. The other source of volatility is the relative effervescence of the institution that is the focus of our attention. Whatever the reason for it, and it is arguable that mass higher education both by its sheer scale and by the increasing press of public oversight – both being the driving force behind evaluation and quality – is more subject to short term and often very radical adjustments – others would doubtless term it 'the drive to relevance', 'market responsiveness' or 'meeting the demands of the consumer' – than any time since the end of World War Two. Indeed, there is a good case to be made for the past ten years being more significant in the impact of social and political agendas on the essential workings – what Martin Trow termed 'the private life' – of higher education (Trow 1977) than that earlier spate of growth of the Sixties. It can probably also be argued – and certainly researched – that never in recent times has higher education been more externally driven than over the course of the past decade (Neave 1995).

The tensions in our field

If one accepts this particular interpretation of higher education being increasingly driven from without – though it remains yet to be ascertained how far this phenomenon really impinges on the daily life and conduct of academia acting in its innermost being – then it follows that our field is itself largely under similar pressures. We are thus torn two ways: on the one hand, to lay out lines of common discourse between our disciplines which may – hopefully – serve as a preliminary to identifying a certain core of 'orthodoxy' to ensure the long term viability of higher education studies (one should always remember that the university has survived quite well for some 700 years without us) and, on the other, by the need to ensure the survival of those already present in the field by putting our knowledge at the service of precisely those forces which are the architects of change. Success in the latter may tempt some to take the view that our 'service activities' as consultants is the receipe that should be applied in shaping the former, on the grounds that it is, after all, an evident form of customer satisfaction. Therefore, in keeping with the entrepreneurial ethic of the day, our inner intellectual identity should reflect our external activities as consultants, analysts and evaluators. Others will naturally take an 'internalist' view. This view says that our work as scholars and teachers should determine what we do and how we do it, when dealing with the outside world. To this, one might add a third stance which, conceivably, separates the demands the 'market' makes on the individual 'expert' from the internally driven canons which the discipline demands of the 'scholar' and 'renders unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and unto the discipline that which one's peers judge acceptable'. Here, one risks treading on the delicate ground of personal inclination, scholarly ethics and material circumstances. But if we go beyond individual circumstances, it is evident nevertheless that our guild of scholars lives in a state of continual tension in which pragmatic and external considerations intermesh with that other internally driven quest to seek out a degree of intellectual identity that will hold our domain together as a coherent corpus of knowledge over the long term.

History: a broad church

These tensions which are in-built into the study of higher education, are not likely to diminish. On the contrary, the demand for systematic evaluation, assessment and monitoring activities of all kinds to ensure that higher education adheres to that degree of transparency which, it is believed the public requires, are likely to place scholars in all fields of this domain under severe pressure. And perhaps none more severe than contemporary history, for as

Sheldon Rothblatt has pointed out in a masterly and exhaustive examination of the way History illuminates the study of higher education, there is no single over-riding paradigm, no specific series of techniques that towers above the rest. 'As history is an eclectic and empirical mode of understanding, however much it borrows from the deductive sciences, one form of reasoning and presentation inevitably shades into another' (Rothblatt, 1992, p. 1824). In short, if the Consortium of Higher Education Researchers is a broad Church which I suggested was the case (Neave 1994), History is no less broad a chapel!

One of the key roles of the historical approach lies precisely in testing the validity which models developed within the contemporary setting, retain at other epocs. Perkin's work on the history of the professions is exemplary in this regard (Perkin 1989). Another central purpose involves the use of modern-day concepts to gain purchase and insight on situations the outcome of which is known. The long and careful exploration into the influences, social, economic and cultural that prompted the rise of the scientific community in Britain, France, Prussia and the United States, undertaken by Joseph Ben David, stands fully within this tradition (Ben David 1977).

Yet, if there is value to be had in teasing out the origins of an issue that confronts us in the present, the way we view it at present often moulds our interpretation of its origins. Take, for example, that crucial event which in 1919, set the coping stone on what has been seen as quintessential to the so-called British model of relationship between government and university – the founding of the University Grants Committee. The commonly accepted interpretation is that it set down a powerful and influential collective voice through which the universities negotiated with government, whilst the government, for its part, abstained from direct intervention in the individual allocation of finance and in 'the private life' of higher learning (Berdahl 1959; Trow 1977). Such an arrangement stood as the Apotheosis of what has long been held to be the 'proper' relationship between a Liberal – and modest – State and higher learning.

This long established view is now undergoing a certain reassessment, largely as a result of the changes which set market forces as the prime determinant in the development of British higher education and which also abolished this concordat. One interpretation takes the view that if the State espoused a 'hands off' policy to protect the university against the type of intervention displayed at the time by national administration in the higher education systems of Continental Europe, this same 'protection' also armoured the university against the rigours of the market and against developing close ties with industry (Scott 1984). More recently, another line of thought has developed, drawing on the argument that financial diversification is a more efficacious guarantee of institutional autonomy than reliance on the coffers of the State.

From this perspective, the UGC may indeed have preserved institutional autonomy, but it was an autonomy purchased dearly for it placed universities in a position of increasing reliance on public funds. Whilst the UGC constituted on the one hand a unique British solution to university and State, from the purely financial angle, it also brought that relationship far closer to the State monopoly over resource allocation which predominated in the major systems of contemporary Europe (Ball 1996).

Clearly, the ideological spectacles we put on to view the present often tend to influence our views of the past, not to mention that other role which history cannot always avoid, and which was well known to the Chinese: namely, the rewriting of history to show the inevitability of the new Emperor's coming to the throne when he did. Thus, one has to be exceeding careful in avoiding that most unoriginal of all sins of the historian, namely Anachronism. That is, judging the past in the light of knowledge not available at the time. If we are to judge the past, it should be on its own terms. In other words, historians are concerned with the context into which facts, decisions, events and structures are fitted and how, in turn, those elements shape context (Rothblatt 1992).

History, policy studies and M. de Tallyrand-Périgord

Despite the rise of what is today termed contemporary history, one has equally to recognize a certain reticence on the part of many of the 'policy related' perspectives in higher education to go into the historical dimension of their enquiry. There are, of course, exceptions. In the United Kingdom, Harold Silver's work on the CNAA is an outstanding example of the marriage between the two. This is a pity, above all when one is seeking to ascertain whether a particular policy has or has not achieved its ends. For what may appear a dismal failure within a time frame determined by political or governmental considerations may often turn out to be a reasonable success when judged within an institutional time frame (Kallen 1984) as neat an example one might wish of the Talleyrand Principle. This axiom honours that 'veritable phoenix of duplicity', Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, an early 19th century French statesman, diplomat and famous turn-coat. It says 'Treason is merely a question of dates'. So, for that matter may success be, in implementation studies.

Now the point I am making is that more attention ought to be paid to the long-term outcomes of policy. From this it follows that what we might well attend to with interest and profit for our fields are those initiatives taken some ten to fifteen years back and how they have emerged today. In short, we see the evaluation of policy as located in an historical process rather than being wholly part of the contemporary analysis itself. We can effectively go behind the

policy agenda as set and defined by either government or administration and examine the motives, interests, perceptions and arguments that contributed to the way a given issue was drawn up, the alternatives contemplated, the reasons for their abandonment. In short, examine the private dialogue and influences which determined how a particular issue was shaped by whom and for what reason, stated as well as unstated, that were considered prior to its emerging onto the public platform. In seeking out the origins of a specific initiative or policy line, rather than remaining hemmed in by the terms set by the problematique as defined by officialdom. It is also possible to place current initiatives in a more resolutely historical and comparative setting by seeking parallel situations in earlier times and comparing the roles assumed by similar interests then with those taken up by their sucessors today.

The readiness to do so not only opens up a relatively little explored and long term dimension to our understanding of the process of policy. It is also important for our being able to uphold the claim to an independent and critical standing for our field. This is not to say that critical and scholarly judgement are inevitably blunted by sensitivity to the demands of the commissioning agency. Still less is it to suggest that other disciplines are more accomodating to such constrictions. It is simply to note that one of the main concern's of the historian's craft involves the exploration of those alternative possibilities that have been ruled out, in an attempt to estimate what might have been the consequences of following them by contrast to the consequences that ensued from following the line actually taken. This is a very different perspective from the basic exercise of policy research which, once the framework, whether technical or political, has been set, seeks to evaluate a limited number of options with a view, in the light of the objectives assigned, to eliminating all but the optimal. At a time when higher education is increasingly faced with the cry 'There is no alternative', a perspective that proceeds on diametrically opposite principle of opening up the alternatives that 'expert society' wishes to exclude, is surely a healthy challenge.

Context

For those working in an historical setting, context – the subtle variations that go to make up the social, cultural and political fabric within which an issue is situated – is essential. Having an intimate grasp over say, the historical or contemporary development of a given system of higher education, of the laws that regulate it, the procedures that govern its administration, the conditions which govern access, are certainly necessary, but not sufficient. For the higher education system of any nation, is seated not simply within the academic culture of that nation. It is also firmly anchored within the whole range of

social values and beliefs which, by their nature, tend very often to be opaque to the outsider for the very reason that they form part of that civilisation's central norms and thus are largely taken for granted by its denizens. How individual scholars become sensitive to these subtleties is no easy matter. Like many aspects of acquiring an historical sensitivity, it is largely a question of perseverance, alertness and the accumulation of experience. But this absorption of the broader cultural environment is a vital dimension in the personal development of the historian. Without it, the individual remains bereft of any deeper insight and understanding of the significance, symbolic as well as real, which lies beneath the practices, organisational forms and academic conventions and which enables him or her to grasp their meaning as they are interpreted by the society in which they are set. The absence of contextual sensitivity tends often to result in accounts that stand as a one dimensional reflection of the observer's views, rather than possessing that special capacity which is the ability to account for a particular feature or event in terms that are authentic to the values of those who underwent it, but understandable to those who observe it at another point in time, from another country or both.

There is, however, another meaning to context which falls within the realm of technique rather than perception. In this second sense, context can be a particular issue or problematique, for instance, the role of a particular key establishment in building national academic identity which was John Craig's concern when he studied the role of the University of Strasbourg in attaching Alsace first to the German Empire and, after 1918, as a key institution in its reassimilation into France (Craig 1984). Or it may be a given period as a means of assessing the developments during it either as part of the continuing saga of the institution or as a particular crucial watershed that has set the institution on another path. One example of this which comes to mind is Minot's short excursion into developments in French higher education over the period May 1968 to May 1983: *Quinze Ans d'histoire des institutions universitaires* (Minot 1983). Minot's periodisation was set within a largely legal framework beginning with the Events which led up to the Higher Education Framework Law of November 1968 and terminating with the promulgation of a similar piece of legislation in 1983 which, in effect, superceded the so-called Faure Law of 1968. Problematique, periodisation and finally focus which, within institutional histories ranges from individual universities through to national provision. Problematique, periodisation and focus are the three basic categories within which the historian works.

This is relatively straightforward provided we have a reasonable consensus as to what have been the major developments in the world of higher education. However, half the difficulty lies precisely in that grey zone where the dust and uncertainty of the present still obscure our ability to give not order,

but a certain clarity to recent developments. At what point is it fair to say that contemporary affairs end and history begins? When has the 'tumult and shouting' died down sufficiently for us to undertake an assessment of the enduring effects that have sprung from out the particular problematique in which we are interested. When can we reasonably begin that task of weighing up the significance of what has taken place? This is not a problem unique to the area of higher education. It is rather intrinsic to the historian's art. Already in the early 1900s, William Temperley, a specialist in diplomatic history, posed the question whether the Modern History syllabus of London University ought not be brought up to the death of Queen Victoria – 1901 – and that in 1905. That he was unsuccessful reflects that reluctance which many historians then felt about being deeply embroiled in actuality though this has changed in the meantime.

History, theory and long term outcomes

If we are interested in testing the long term validity of a given theory or trying to gain a better grasp on the policy process, in short, if we are concerned with the internal refinement of our particular disciplines, then the use of historical source material is an important auxiliary in the exact sense of the term, to our purpose. It does so in two ways. First, History provides us with a vehicle for examining issues whose outcome is known and, depending on the sources available, the way of tracing how it evolved from start to finish. Second, it allows us a wider temporal stage on which to verify whether a hypothesis – say about student enrolments increasing at time of economic down turn, the so called 'parking lot thesis' – is valid beyond the immediate circumstances which gave rise to it in the Seventies. If, for sake of argument, it were to be verified over the last century within one country – or better still – over more than one, then our theory is strengthened. If not, then we have performed the equally important task of showing its limited applicability.

There are, naturally, certain trade-offs involved. Obtaining reliable, long term statistical runs is a doughty task. And in the examination of similar issues in earlier times, above all in examining the perceptions and interests of participants in forms other than the written source is often not always possible. Key participants, actors or portal personnages may no longer be with us. And those who are, may have memories less than perfect – though it is often surprising how much is recalled in vivid and lurid detail. Their accounts, too, may be partial. But similar pitfalls await he who works on the written document anyhow. And it is the central part of the historian's business to reconstruct the past by questioning not merely the document – the artifact – but also by seeking to gain insight into the mentality of the

individual, of the group of which he or she was part. And this, as I mentioned earlier, gives full play to the imaginative, deductive and experiential elements involved in contextual sensitivity. Agreed, the outcome may well fall far short of perfection. But, it will at least be based on on evidence which does permit a final evaluation without the risk that insufficent time has elapsed for the full consequences of whatever measure one is interested in to assert themselves and for their outcomes to be known.

In short, historical material and the historical perspective permit a species of 'backward mapping' (Elmore 1978/9), applied less to the elaboration of policy itself so much as to the underlying theoretical concept of which a particular incident may be claimed to illustrate. There is much that is useful to be found in the histories of individual establishments as well as the accounts of key individuals in them which can be considered as extended versions of institutional case studies.

The European Journal of Education: an example

So much for the benefits of archives, documents and the passage of time. How does this work out in practice? To give a grounded example of this way of thinking, rather than setting out a rigid methodology which, if it proved acceptable to a few in the history community would almost certainly summon up the wholehearted disagreement of many, I will take a brief look at one particular activity, carried out within the framework of the *European Journal of Education*. More specifically, I want to take a brief excursion down that part of the Journal which, every two years, sets out to examine 'Trends in Higher Education.'

Formally speaking, the European Journal of Education is not vehicle for the history of education. Rather it focusses on education policy at a post 16 level. The Review itself has been going for sixteen years, more precisely since 1978. In terms of territorial coverage, it focusses on what are now the Member States of the European Union, not because of their Membership but rather because they represent both heartland and periphery of Western European higher education systems. From time to time, and more particularly since 1989, increasing attention has been paid to East and Central Europe.[2] Each review involves a series of national case studies – the number has ranged in years of great sloth from four to around eight in the years of great industry.

In organising the Review two decisions are crucial: choice of the particular systems to be examined and the identification of the theme to be explored. Most reviews include the major systems, France, Germany, Italy, United Kingdom with others being rotated through on a four to six year cycle. The choice of topic is usually made on the basis of those particular themes or issues

that have emerged as central in the world of higher education across a number of countries and which may serve as a shared Leitmotif to that period. Thus for instance, the theme chosen to analyse developments over the years 1988–1990, focussed on the way higher education systems were 'Preparing for the Market'. There was, admittedly, a certain degree of deliberate ambiguity in this title which could be interpreted both in terms of the determination of governments to have higher education adapt to being 'market driven' and, at a slightly different level, as a response within the then European Community by Member State higher education systems to the increasing boldness of the European Commission. The 1992 issue concentrated on 'The Professionalisation of higher education', an issue which had been gathering weight since the mid Eighties and which lent itself therefore, to a more medium term perspective as individual contibuters traced the origins of this new initiative over the ensuring 5 to seven years. Ten countries were covered in these two reviews with a core group which included France, Netherlands, Norway, Germany and the United Kingdom, with Ireland, Greece, Yugoslavia, Denmark and Finland also figuring.

Though the purpose of the Review is to provide, on the one hand synoptic case study of individual higher education systems as they have evolved – or not – in terms of the theme chosen and on the other, to establish a synthesis drawing together the common elements or points of divergence. Thus, whilst contributors explore the theme within their own national settings and whilst possible points of common interest are pointed out, these are by no means mandatory. Indeed, one point in the whole exercise is to ascertain the extent to which a given issue is present within a particular system and the forms it assumes. Or, alternatively its absence and the explanation for that. The indication of points of possible commonalty is left to the individual scholar's judgement. For it is as important to give full reign to difference as it is to note similarities of measures taken. Each article is then self-contained – study of the way the specific theme has developed within a given national setting and subject to the variety of disciplinary perspectives that each brings to the undertaking. No attempt is made to ensure any homogeneity in interpretation. Nor for that matter is there any prior selection to ensure a homogenity in the particular discipline through which contributors operate, though it is self evident that there is a certain in-built leaning towards the 'policy sciences' – econcomics, public administration, political science, sociology of organisations – and towards those whose research tends to concentrate on macro level analysis and that can include philosophers, anthropologists and historians. There is no whiff of disciplinary orthodoxy. What is decisive, however, is the active involvement and research interests of the authors who are either

currently working on the topic chosen, have recently completed research that bears directly on the topic or have a known record in it.

Synthetic ambitions

Offsetting the individual case studies and serving both as an introductory overview and as a vehicle to identify common strands of development across individual countries is a species of Editorial synthesis. It fulfils a number of functions. First, it serves as a general framework within which developments in a given system of higher education may be located. Second, it brings together a number of strands which have been independently and separately identified within the individual system case-studies. Third, it acts as a 'horizontal' perspective, complementary to the 'vertical' cut represented in the case-studies. Finally, and this brings us back to our central theme, it has the intent to place the overall theme within a setting that may broadly be equated with the contemporary history of higher education in Europe. Clearly, this cannot be a definitive exercise. By its very nature, contemporary history is a first approximation with a reality that, in any case is complex and made no less so by being near to it in time and near to it through one's degree of involvement.

Nevertheless, a good case can be made out for this approach. Given the very complexity of the institution of higher education, quite apart from the complexity of intellectual perspectives that are brought to bear in studying it, any attempt – even if it does not succeed – that gives us an opportunity to look at the wood rather than to dwell on our own tree has a certain value. And if the view or the interpretation is partial – or erroneous – then others will very soon it set right. But for it to be set right requires in the first place that it be set down and that we have that view.

For the record

There is one final plea to be made for the contemporary historical approach. And that is an extension to the argument just made in favor of first approximation. Just as contemporary history is a means of commenting on the way higher education adapts to change in the light of how it did so in the past, so our studies – all of us – form part of that tableau which those who come after us may occasionally refer to, if only to explain their own woes or to account – though perhaps more rarely – for their triumphs. But, there is no one who knows us better than we. Our perception of our time may indeed be lamentably out of kilter with the judgement or the opinion of those who

come after us. Nevertheless, if what we are now doing is to have some sense to our students, we should leave them an entry point through which they can reach back and understand what we are doing in the context of our times. I am not saying that this is an exclusive function of contemporary history. But it is certainly one door through which the future can unlock their past which is, of course, our present.

Notes

[1] Historians and particular those involved in systems level studies, would argue that one of their tasks has precisely been to link the two together and to do so de longue durée.
[2] Volume 25 number 4 for example, dealt with recent developments in Central and Eastern Europe.

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